

Rethinking rural resistance in China
*A Case Study of the 2011 Wukan Incident in Guangdong
province*

Anne Christine Lie



MA. Thesis (60 credits)
Chinese Society and Politics
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Spring 2014

Rethinking rural resistance in China

A Case Study of the 2011 Wukan Incident in Guangdong province

Anne Christine Lie

Copyright Anne Christine Lie

2014

Rethinking rural resistance in China

A Case Study of the 2011 Wukan Incident in Guangdong province

Anne Christine Lie

<http://www.duo.uio.no>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

IV

Abstract

Rural protests and mass incidents are crucial to our understanding of China's state-society relations, the possibility for economic and political reform and the future of the Chinese Communist Party regime. The widespread abuse of collective land ownership rights since the reform era is a major cause of rural unrest in China, and mass incidents will likely continue to increase. The Wukan Incident is one of many cases of rural unrest that illustrate the growing gap between urban and rural development, the deep-seated problems of local government corruption and the desperate need for land rights reform.

I will do a case study of the 2011 Wukan Incident, in which people protested the illegal sale of their farmland and subsequently demanded local village committee elections, which had not been held in Wukan for many decades.

It is the aim of this thesis that a qualitative study of the Wukan case can contribute to our understanding of rural unrest in China. This thesis will consider the theory of rightful resistance, as put forth by Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, an influential theory in the field of popular resistance in China. O'Brien and Li have found that the central government shows a willingness to tolerate local protests as long as they do not directly challenge the Party's claim to power.

This thesis is based on qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations from fieldwork in Wukan village, Guangdong province. Other primary sources include messages from the social media site Sina Weibo. Furthermore, I have relied on a wide variety of written texts, including news media reports and academic articles.

My findings show that the Wukan Incident can be considered a case of rightful resistance. However, based on these new empirical findings, I will argue that there may be other variables that can add to the theory of rightful resistance. First of all, I have argued that the geographical location of Wukan had a significant influence on how protesters viewed opportunities for protesting and subsequently how they made use of allies. Secondly, the Wukan case highlights the growing importance of social media and online activism in cases of rural unrest in China.

Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank my thesis advisor Prof. Mette Halskov Hansen for her clear and useful comments, and for opening my eyes to the possibility of conducting fieldwork research. This has been a very valuable experience for me, and I am truly grateful to have had you as my advisor. Your feedback always made so much sense, and you even managed to make it fun to discuss my mistakes and misconceptions.

I would also like to give sincere thanks to the China Programme at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights for a scholarship and the connections needed for a long stay in Guangzhou. Valuable sources, constructive feedback and news updates about Wukan were generously provided by Cecilie Figenschou Bakke, Anne Kari B. Johansen and Wang Yi.

The fieldwork was quite challenging, but I am so happy I got to meet and interview some of the wonderful people in Wukan village. The trip would not have been possible without the help of Prof. Yang Songcai. I am deeply grateful to you and your colleagues at the Guangzhou Human Rights Research and Education Center, for insightful comments and useful contacts. The generous hospitality of Mr. Wang Kun at the Center in Guangzhou will not be forgotten.

My fellow student Kristian Espelid has acted as sounding board for ideas and has been a major help in finding good sources. I would also like to thank Prof. Koen Wellens for news alerts and useful sources, and Prof. Pang Cuiming for teaching me how to conceptualize and structure a thesis.

I want to thank my family for proofreading and moral support, all the way from Australia. Many, many brave little commas did not make it back, but a lot of friendly advice did. Thank you, Mamma and Pappa.

Jonas, I could not have done this without you. You have helped me immensely as a proofreader and in finding good sources. You have demanded progress and excellence, yet you have also been very sweet and supportive during this whole process. Never has any man amassed as many ‘uscados’ (or goodwill points) as you.

I am deeply grateful to all those who have helped me proofread and better understand the Wukan Incident and rural protests in China, but the errors that remain are my responsibility alone.

Contents

Abstract	V
Acknowledgements.....	VII
Introduction	1
Definitions and terminology: “Mass incident”	2
An overview of the following chapters:	4
1 Research Methodology.....	6
1.1 Qualitative research and the case study method	6
1.2 Interviews	7
1.3 Observation	10
1.4 Written texts and other materials	11
1.5 Studying sensitive research topics	12
1.6 Staying with a host family in Wukan village.....	14
1.7 Self-censorship and interviewer expectations	16
1.8 Conclusion	16
2 The Wukan Incident and rural unrest in China	17
2.1 Background: The Wukan Incident	17
Prelude.....	17
The Wukan Incident of September 21, 2011	19
Period of self-governance	20
Further demonstrations and subsequent arrests	21
Aftermath.....	23
2.2 Media coverage of the Wukan Incident and the ‘Wukan model’	23
2.3 Chinese academic articles: The Wukan case as a land problem	24
2.4 Land issues and property rights in China	25
2.4 How does the Wukan case compare to other mass incidents?.....	29
2.5 Conclusion	31
3 Theoretical framework: Rightful resistance.....	33
3.1 What is rightful resistance?	34
3.2 Key concepts.....	35
Rightful claims	35
Unpacking the state	36
Reliance on allies and mobilization of support from greater public	38
3.3 Strengths and limitations of the theory of rightful resistance	38
3.4 Conclusion	40
4 Analysis Part I: Perceptions of the local and central government in Wukan village	42
4.1 Perception of local government: Nameless corruption	43
4.2 Perception of central government: Abstract savior.....	46
4.3 Perception change over time.....	47
4.4 Conclusion	49

5 Analysis Part II: Perceptions of the news media and social media in Wukan village	51
5.1 Perception of the media in general.....	51
5.2 Perception of domestic media: Untrustworthy	53
5.3 Perception of foreign media: Friends and allies	54
5.4 Perception of social media: A tool to communicate.....	59
5.5 Perception of video documentaries: Telling the Wukan story	63
5.6 Conclusion	64
6 Analysis Part III: The Wukan Incident as a Case of Rightful Resistance	66
6.1 Evidence of rightful claims: How did Wukan villagers frame their claims? ..	66
6.2 How did the Wukan villagers perceive their claims and actions?.....	70
6.3 Evidence of unpacking the state	72
6.4 Evidence of reliance on allies	75
6.5 Conclusion	76
7 Conclusion	77
Bibliography.....	81
Appendix A: Interview guide	89
Appendix B: An overview of primary and secondary sources	92
Appendix C: Dictionary.....	97

Introduction

Social unrest is one of the major challenges for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the post-reform era. The party leadership sees social stability as a crucial condition for economic development and political stability. Popular protests put pressure on the party-state, and make the party appear weak. The government fears collective protests undermine the legitimacy of the party.¹ More often than not, however, rural protests do not challenge the political system or the party, nor seek to “threaten the existence of the regime.”² Protests usually address major grievances and abuses of power by targeting select officials and the local government, not the central government.³

Collective protests in China have already been widely discussed in scholarly work. China scholars have analyzed how and why people protest, continuity and change in government response and whether or not they were successful in achieving their goals.⁴ Based on a case study in Wukan village, this thesis will evaluate the influential theoretical concept of ‘rightful resistance’, as developed by Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang. Rightful resistance is briefly defined as a type of protest that uses the ideology and language of the state to frame rights and injustices, and does not raise political demands that challenge the political system as such.⁵ O’Brien and Li’s theory is based on substantive research on rural protests in post-reform China. O’Brien and Li published their book *Rightful resistance in Rural China* in 2006, but a lot of their research dates back to 1995. This begs the question: is the theory of rightful resistance still valid ten years after their research? Given the rapid transformation of Chinese society since the theory of rightful resistance was coined, this thesis will consider the technological and social changes evident in contemporary protests in China. For example, in opposing the illegal requisition of farmers’ land, the Internet has played an important role in exposing corrupt local officials and spreading information.⁶

Doing a case study analysis of a recent mass incident will hopefully contribute to our understanding of rural resistance in China. To this end, I have selected the 2011 Wukan village incident as case study. The 2011 Wukan Incident (乌坎事件 *Wukan shijian*) in

¹ Trevaskes and Nesossi (2012). See also, Li (2001, p.198).

² Diamant, Lubman, and O’Brien (2005, p.6)

³ Cai (2010, p.4), Bernstein and Lü (2000, p.742)

⁴ See for example: Diamant, Lubman, and O’Brien (2005), Perry (2002), Cai (2010).

⁵ O’Brien and Li (2007, p.2)

⁶ Yu (Jan 19, 2011, p.4)

Guangdong province was a collective protest in which thousands of villagers protested against the loss of their traditional farmland, and against the corrupt local officials who had sold the land to developers. The Wukan Incident was an important and widely debated case in China in 2012. An in-depth analysis of this incident, including interviews from fieldwork, will contribute to the academic discourse on the study of protests in rural China. It is not the aim of this thesis to generalize the findings from a single village, but rather to show how one village community has experienced a collective protest and to use this case study to reconsider the theory of rightful resistance.

Some of the main questions this thesis will address: Is the Wukan Incident a case of rightful resistance? To what extent is the theory of rightful resistance still valid, and how might we improve the theory? Thus, it is not just a question of whether or not the Wukan Incident is a case of rightful resistance, but also about how new empirical data might help improve an existing theory.

Definitions and terminology: “Mass incident”

In official Chinese terms, collective protests and social unrest of any kind is called a ‘mass incident’ (群体性事件 *quntixing shijian*). However, the term mass incident has been used to describe vastly different types of collective protests in China; from a sit-in, march, rally or strike to a full-blown street demonstration organized to protest against injustices or abuses of power. Such protests might involve ten people or more than 1,000 and, in some cases, over 10,000.⁷ It is in this context that we consider the 2011 Wukan Incident. The Wukan Incident was a mass incident in which more than 10,000 people participated in collective resistance against local government officials and illegal land expropriation in the form of petitions, peaceful demonstrations and riots.

A recent study published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) used media reports to investigate the scale, features and triggering factors of mass incidents in China. According to this study, there were 871 public news reports on mass incidents with 100 participants or more in the time period of January 1, 2000 to September 30, 2013. As many as 30.7 per cent of all these mass incidents occurred in Guangdong province.⁸

These statistics also show that the vast majority of these incidents occurred between 2010 and 2012.⁹ The government’s stability maintenance budget supports this finding; the

⁷ China Academy of Social Sciences (2014, p.271)

⁸ China Academy of Social Sciences (2014, p.273)

⁹ China Academy of Social Sciences (2014, p.271)

government's public security spending increased by 13.8 per cent between 2010 and 2011. To put it in context, China's public security spending in 2011 amounted to 624 billion yuan (元 *yuan*).¹⁰ China's defense spending for the same period was 601 billion yuan.¹¹ This shows that the policy of maintaining social stability is high on the central government's agenda.

In terms of the nature of the grievances that underlie these mass incidents, the CASS report shows that mass incidents include workers' strikes, environmental protests, protests by national minorities, tax grievance disputes and many more. Of the 871 cases of publicly reported mass incidents, 97 cases were due to relocation and land requisition (拆迁征地 *chaiqian zheng di*), which was the second most important cause of mass incidents after labor disputes (劳资纠纷 *laozi jiufen*).¹²

However, the CASS study has made a criteria-based selection of mass incidents, and is meant to shed light on major trends in mass incidents in China. Though the figures from the CASS report may highlight similarities in the causes and localities of mass incidents, they do not give a good indication of how many mass incidents occur in China. Other official figures claim the number of mass incidents in China have increased from 8,700 mass incidents in 1993 to over 90,000 in 2006, and an approximation of over 120,000 mass incidents in 2010.¹³ This shows the exponential rise of mass incidents in China the past decade. Granted, these earlier figures are not restricted to mass incidents that are reported in the news, do not indicate how many people participated in these mass incidents and do not distinguish between large-scale incidents and small-scale incidents. Most incidents are small in scale. Some reports suggest that instances of collective action with 100 or more participants accounted for less than 15 per cent of the total number of collective action cases in recent years.¹⁴ If this is true, and we consider the approximation of 120,000 mass incidents in 2010, then mass incidents with more than 100 participants would amount to 18,000 in 2010 (15 per cent of 120,000). Conversely, the CASS study from 2014 shows there were 163 reports of mass incidents in the media in 2010.¹⁵ Though the precise figures and increase in number of so-called mass

¹⁰ The renminbi (RMB) is the official currency of the People's Republic of China, the basic unit of which is the yuan (元).

¹¹ Doyon et al. (2012, p.3)

¹² China Academy of Social Sciences (2014, p.280)

¹³ Though I have been unable to find the official data, these statistics are the most frequently cited figures for mass incidents in China. See for example, Zhang and 李静君 (2012, p.5), Zeng (2011, p.151), Pei (2010, p.37), Peng Zhao et al (2008, p.28)

¹⁴ Cai (2010, p.49.)

¹⁵ China Academy of Social Sciences (2014, p.273)

incidents may be disputed, Chinese officials and scholars alike agree that mass incidents are on the rise and pose a great challenge for the government.

Though mass incident is the official Chinese term, many authors who write about mass incidents in China in the socio-political tradition use many other terms interchangeably, such as ‘collective protest’ and ‘popular resistance’.¹⁶ My thesis will reflect this trend, and I will use the terms ‘collective protest/resistance’ or ‘popular protest/resistance’, which are usually taken to mean the same thing. I will also use the term ‘rural protest/resistance’, which is similar, but geographically limited to the Chinese countryside. The terms ‘social unrest’ and ‘rural unrest’ will be used to describe situations and events that are less like organized, political protests, but more like general acts of resistance, and instances that may threaten social stability. I have avoided the terms ‘political movement’ and ‘protest movement’, because they denote a type of resistance that operates in more than one locality and put forward multiple claims, and this does not fit the Wukan case.

An overview of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 describes the qualitative research methods I have used. This thesis is a case study of the Wukan Incident, based on interviews, observation, written texts and video documentaries. I will outline the strengths and limitations of this type of study and discuss the challenges and realities of researching a politically sensitive topic in China.

Chapter 2 provides a background of the Wukan Incident and a look at how the incident was portrayed by news media and Chinese academia. In order to understand why land expropriation is such a common cause of mass incidents in China, I will consider China’s legal framework with regard to collective land ownership, and place the Wukan Incident in the context of other collective protests in China.

Chapter 3 introduces the theory of rightful resistance as put forth by O’Brien and Li. I explain how the theory of rightful resistance can be used as an analytical framework for discussion of the Wukan Incident as well as outline the major strengths and limitations of this theory.

In Chapter 4 I focus on how Wukan village protesters differentiated between local and central government, and how these perceptions might change over time. I argue that the

¹⁶ See for example Cai Yongshun, Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang, Merle Goldman, Elizabeth Perry.

Wukan villagers I talked to had an abstract way of referring to both the local and central government level, even though they took care to distinguish between the two levels of government.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of how some Wukan villagers perceived domestic and foreign news media during the Wukan Incident. I have also considered the use and perception of social media as a communication tool in the Wukan case.

In **Chapter 6**, I argue that the Wukan Incident is a case of rightful resistance. My findings indicate that the Wukan Incident can be considered an example of rightful resistance because there is evidence of rightful claims, unpacking the state and reliance on allies. However, I argue that social media and online activism is of growing importance to rural unrest in China and this is not adequately addressed by the theory of rightful resistance. In this chapter I also look at how limited access to the political decision makers in Beijing might have been a factor that influenced the protest in Wukan.

Chapter 7, the Conclusion, considers this case study in a context of rapid urbanization, the development gap between urban and rural China and the need for reform. Based on my findings from Wukan I conclude that the theory of rightful resistance is still valid. However, my findings suggest that many regional variations, such as geographical distance to Beijing and political decision makers, can offer a more in-depth understanding to rural resistance. Finally, I conclude that the growing use of social media is an important factor to consider when researching rural unrest in China. Both of these variables can be considered in the framework of the theory of rightful resistance.

1 Research Methodology

In this chapter I will describe the qualitative research methods applied in this project and discuss the strengths and limitations of these methods. This chapter will also address the challenges and realities of researching a politically sensitive topic in China. For this thesis I have chosen a case study method because I think this approach is more appropriate to answer the research question; is the theory of rightful resistance still valid, and how might we improve the theory?

1.1 Qualitative research and the case study method

In order to answer the research question, I have focused on one case of collective resistance, the Wukan Incident of 2011. John Gerring defines a case study as “the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases.”¹⁷ An in-depth study of the Wukan Incident allows me to explore different aspects of one mass incident and hopefully shed light on rural resistance in China in general. The aim of this case study is to consider aspects of rural resistance that cannot be explained by statistics alone, such as how people communicate and spread information. As Gerring further states; “Sometimes, in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a large number of examples. We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part.”¹⁸

One of the major problems with case study research is that it is difficult to know how representative the chosen case is. As pointed out by David Silverman, “the problem of ‘representativeness’ is a perennial worry of many qualitative or case study researchers.”¹⁹ Can my findings from one case, the Wukan Incident, be used to comment on a general theory about collective resistance and be used to describe other cases?

The Wukan Incident is not just a randomly selected case of rural resistance. First of all, the land grab problem is an important issue, and is a very common cause of rural unrest in China. Chinese peasants have encountered tremendous difficulties in protecting their rights against land developers. Secondly, the high level of publicity the case received in international news media intrigued me. Wukan is also a recent case, which could help test

¹⁷ Gerring (2007, p.20)

¹⁸ Gerring (2007, p.1)

¹⁹ Silverman (2010, p.140)

whether or not the theory of rightful resistance still proves true, almost a decade after it was published. Furthermore, the situation in Wukan is still unresolved; in many ways it is an ongoing process. So even though the dust has settled, the villagers have yet to receive compensation and the memory of the incident is still fresh in their minds. This led me to hope that people would be willing to discuss the incident with me.

A case study approach allowed me to use several different qualitative research methods and thus ensure more depth and greater reliability. This thesis includes qualitative analysis of conversations, interviews and observational data collected during my fieldwork research in Wukan village. Findings from the interviews led me to take a closer look at the use of social media during the Wukan Incident, so I will include a few blog posts in my analysis. This combination of analytical research methods will arguably give a more complete picture of the Wukan Incident. As noted by Stig Thøgersen, “if we look at China *exclusively* through written sources we obviously get a quite distorted picture (...).”²⁰ Moreover, using a wide variety of sources allowed me to triangulate, or crosscheck, my findings.

1.2 Interviews

The fieldwork was not based on a hypothesis that I needed to prove, but was rather focused on the goal of collecting more information about my chosen case. Therefore, I considered interviews an appropriate research method for this thesis. According to Steinar Kvale, the objective of a qualitative research interview is to try to understand the world from the interviewee’s point of view, and to discover how they experience the world.²¹ My aim for the fieldwork research was to learn more about how the Wukan villagers viewed the 2011 incident, how they described local and central government representatives, how they perceived their rights and their efforts to safeguard those rights.

I arrived in Wukan without any contacts or scheduled appointments, and planned to stay for four days in total. I was advised beforehand that it might be difficult for me to stay in the village for more than a couple of days, because Wukan is closely watched by county and provincial officials. Following this advice, I initially decided to limit my stay to only a couple of days. A fellow researcher, who had visited Wukan several times before, suggested that I visit the offices of the local village committee. I found the office of the village committee and introduced myself to the members who were present as well as other villagers gathered there.

²⁰ Thøgersen (2006, p.203)

²¹ Kvale (1997, p.17)

Here I met one of my key informants, Wei, who gave me a tour of the village and surrounding area and introduced me to several other informants.²² His family invited me to live with them for the duration of my stay in Wukan, and I accepted this generous offer. I will address the research benefits and drawbacks of staying with a local family, but would like to emphasize that this was an opportunity for a more in-depth understanding of the interview subjects and the situation in Wukan.

The selection of interview subjects was not limited to people who had a connection to Wei. I also had the chance to interview people in a local shop and watch a documentary about the Wukan Incident with several other villagers. In total, I conducted nine interviews in Wukan village over the course of four days (see Appendix B: *An overview of primary and secondary sources* for details). During interviews and conversations I tried to get an impression of what my various informants, with their different backgrounds and living situations, think of the incident in Wukan, and if they experienced it as a case of rightful resistance.

My interviews were carefully prepared beforehand, but I did not necessarily ask all the questions I had prepared, and not in order. Thus the interviews were designed as semi-structured interviews, meaning that they were all intended to follow the same line of questioning, although I did not follow it rigidly. Instead, I adopted a more flexible approach in which my informants were able to guide the conversation and elaborate when they felt comfortable doing so. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to stay open and receptive to new ideas, letting my informants guide me to other research foci, an approach promoted by other authors with fieldwork experience.²³

Conversational and informal interviews usually took place in the informants' homes, while drinking tea or doing other small tasks in the home, such as cooking dinner, sewing or watching television. I interviewed villagers in Wukan both with and without a digital recording device, and sometimes I would stop and take notes. It was easier to halt the conversation during conversations one on one, rather than during group conversations. Carrying out the interviews in this manner allowed for a more relaxed and trusting environment for the informant. I interviewed both men and women, from different age groups, and with different levels of participation in the Wukan Incident.

One of the greatest limitations of choosing this method of research was the time constraint. A short stay in the village meant I would have little time to conduct interviews. A

²² Names and identifying references have been changed to protect confidentiality.

²³ O'Brien (2006a, p.29), Lee (1993, pps.28-29)

limited number of interviews provide a small sample size, so I needed to be careful of making generalizations in my analysis and avoid so-called ‘anecdotalism’.²⁴ One anecdote or snippets from brief conversations is not enough to draw conclusions about rural unrest in general, or Wukan in particular. Even though Silverman cautions against ascribing a level of universality to the findings in small sample studies, he suggests that such studies could be seen as ‘exploratory’ rather than ‘definitive’.²⁵

There are several other problems associated with qualitative research and interviews. To what extent can we assume that respondent’s answers correspond to their behavior outside the interview setting? As qualitative researchers, we have perhaps become too reliant on oral communication and too trusting of our informants. The interview has somehow become the key to making sense of our lives, and this is what David Silverman and Paul Atkinson refer to as the ‘interview society’.²⁶

Qualitative research in China often requires language skills and cultural awareness. According to one researcher; “The China field is characterized by a strong focus on the necessity of proficient language skills and contextual knowledge in order to do qualified academic work.”²⁷ The local language in Wukan is a dialect of Cantonese and, since I am a Mandarin Chinese speaker, I was warned that this would be one of the major difficulties of doing fieldwork research in this village. It was therefore a relief to discover that most villagers had a fairly strong knowledge of Mandarin so I conducted the interviews in Mandarin Chinese. Some information may have been lost due to differences in dialect, perhaps because I did not understand, or because the people I interviewed did not know the Mandarin pronunciation. As a non-native speaker I fear that I cannot always probe for and detect subtle nuances in opinion, and that I may have missed opportunities to ask key follow-up questions. However, I experienced few direct communication problems in the field, and those problems were mostly with certain local words or during conversations with the elderly.

I prepared for the interviews by reading reports and articles and watching documentaries beforehand. Not only did this give me an introduction to important dates and key persons, but the articles and documentaries also provided a lot of useful, contextual knowledge. Being comfortable with the language and words used to describe events, as well as being able to recognize names and faces of key persons was crucial to conducting

²⁴ Silverman (2010, p.276)

²⁵ Silverman (2010, p.37)

²⁶ Silverman and Atkinson (1997, p.270)

²⁷ Sæther (2006, p.45)

successful interviews with the Wukan villagers. In an attempt to get to know the discursive field of collective protests in China, I also arranged interviews with several scholars. I met with three scholars within the field of law and political science. These three informants were very familiar with the Wukan Incident, one of whom had conducted his own research in Wukan. They served as my professional informants, and I greatly benefited from the knowledge I gained from these interviews and discussions before I visited the village. In my analysis, I have used findings from the interviews with Chinese academic researchers to complement the interview findings from Wukan.

1.3 Observation

In addition to using non-standardized interviews and relying on conversations for information, I also used observation as a method of gathering information. Quantitative researchers claim that observation can be unreliable as a data collection method because observations are subjective.²⁸ However, observation is a useful tool when researching and studying another culture, and may complement the findings from the interviews. Staying with a host family in Wukan gave me the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge about communication, activities and social conventions, simply by observing. For instance, the family I stayed with in Wukan invited me to join them and their friends for a screening of the full-length documentary entitled *Three Days in Wukan* (乌坎三日 *Wukan san ri*), about the Wukan Incident. I thus had the unique opportunity to study not merely the film, but also their behavior and reactions to the events shown in the movie and ask them questions about how they felt about the documentary.

Other useful observations were made during walks around the village area. Among other things, I discovered that Wukan is not a very poor village. All the households I visited in the main village area had spacious living quarters, at least one moped, a television set and relatively expensive furniture. Many families had small enclosures for hens, geese or pigs close to their houses. Wukan village has a fair number of temples, and the religious cultural traditions are important to the villagers. Several festivals are held throughout the year to celebrate the deities, which indicates the villagers can afford the occasional celebration. However, conversations with women in the households revealed that they also did odd jobs such as sewing sequins on sandal-straps, to be sent in bulk to a shoe-manufacturer. This could indicate that families need extra income sources and try different strategies to diversify their

²⁸ Silverman (2010, p.122)

household income. The difference between city life and life in the village is something that a many of my respondents wanted to talk to me about. They were very conscious of the fast-developing economy in the region and afraid that their village lifestyle is in danger. All this provides important contextual background that will help me analyze the interviews in later chapters.

1.4 Written texts and other materials

In addition to using observation and interviews as key methods to collect data, I have also relied heavily on a diverse range of written texts. Among the documents used in this study are Chinese statistics on mass incidents, Chinese government documents, academic articles by Chinese scholars written in both Chinese and English, and a selection of articles and books by scholars from outside of China. I have for the most part selected recent Chinese academic articles, most of them published in journals with a large readership. I have relied on different kinds of audiovisual data for my background research; including the video documentaries *Wukan* (乌坎), directed by Chen Xilin and *Three Days in Wukan* (乌坎三日 *Wukan san ri*) made by Ai Xiaoming (Chinese videographer and professor at Sun Yat-sen University). The first documentary was mentioned by a young Wukan blogger, and I saw the documentary by Ai Xiaoming with my host family in Wukan. I also saw the documentary series *Wukan: After the Uprising*, an *Al-Jazeera* production, because this documentary focused on the aftermath of the Wukan Incident, not just the protests.

I have also relied on media reports of the incident in Wukan as well as journalist interviews with Wukan villagers. In terms of news media reports on the Wukan Incident, foreign media outlets vastly outnumbered the reports from Mainland China, and this is reflected in my list of sources. I use the term ‘foreign media’ in much the same way as my interview subjects in Wukan did; namely as news media from a range of countries that includes, but is not limited to, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, France, Germany, the United States, Canada and Great Britain. The fact that my respondents did not mention Italy or Spain suggests that this is not a completely arbitrary list of countries, it may be that they were generally more aware of or attached greater significance to more wealthy and powerful countries in Europe. Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore have Chinese-language publications, so it is not surprising that these countries were mentioned. My respondents did not mention any specific Middle Eastern publications or countries, though they did refer to ‘Arabic reporters’ (阿拉伯文记者 *Alabowen jizhe*). Therefore, my research of foreign media

coverage of the Wukan Incident also includes reports from Al-Jazeera. However, the Wukan villagers I talked to often distinguished between ‘Hong Kong journalists’ (香港记者 *Xianggang jizhe*) and other ‘foreign journalists’ (外国记者 *waiguo jizhe*). In order to explain how and why Wukan villagers made this distinction, I will sometimes distinguish Hong Kong media from other foreign media. How Wukan villagers perceive the domestic and foreign media’s role in the Wukan Incident will be discussed in chapter 5.

I also distinguish between news media (newspapers, television, radio) and social media and I use the term social media to refer to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, such as Sina Weibo (新浪微博 *xinlang weibo*), Twitter and QQ. For my own research purposes, I have also used the website Free Weibo (自由微薄 *ziyou weibo*), an uncensored website with information posted on Weibo. This site allows me to view messages that have been deleted by censors. I have chosen to look at Weibo instead of QQ and Twitter, because access to QQ chat groups is often restricted to group members, and Weibo is generally more accessible to Chinese netizens than Twitter. Furthermore, Weibo allows for longer messages and more comments in comparison to Twitter.

1.5 Studying sensitive research topics

In some situations researchers may trespass into areas that involve some sort of social conflict that threatens the interests of the powerful in society. During the course of my fieldwork, both Wukan villagers and academics alike made comments such as “the Wukan Incident is a sensitive issue in China” and “you have chosen a sensitive topic”. But why is the Wukan Incident sensitive and how has the sensitive nature of the topic affected my research and data collection?

The Wukan Incident may be considered sensitive because of the socio-political context of China. Generally speaking, “elites, powerful organizations and governments are often sensitive to the way in which their image is portrayed.”²⁹ Furthermore, China’s authoritarian, single party rule means that any socio-political movement or unrest could be seen as challenging the authority and legitimacy of the party-state. Cai Yongshun argues that governments in authoritarian regimes are much more sensitive to mass incidents and social unrest than democratic governments: “The occurrence of such incidents may signal problems with social control or the weakness of the government because such events are not supposed

²⁹ Lee (1993, p.9)

to occur in a regime where citizens are denied the right to disrupt the system.”³⁰ Cases of rural unrest in China are all the more sensitive, because the political legitimacy of the Party rests on its historic claim to represent the peasants.³¹ Rural unrest signals that the Party does not adequately represent or protect the peasants’ interests. This shows that rural unrest is a sensitive research topic because of the implications it has for the Party’s image. But in what ways does a sensitive topic affect the researcher and the research process?

In *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*, Raymond Lee argues that sensitive studies should be defined as; “research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it.”³² This definition excludes the impact a study might have on society, but emphasizes the consequences of undertaking sensitive research for both the researcher and the research participant. According to Lee, sensitivity “potentially affects almost every stage of the research process (...). The problems and issues that arise at each stage take a variety of forms. They may be methodological, technical, ethical, political or legal.”³³

For my own study, doing fieldwork on a sensitive issue presented problems in all of these areas. One of the major challenges was planning the fieldwork. For example, I could not apply for a research visa, as the research topic was too sensitive. I went on a tourist visa, and therefore had no affiliation with a Chinese academic institution. Being tied to an academic institution is useful because social connections are seen as important in China, and this could have afforded opportunities to gain access to more information. One of my contacts offered to take me to Wukan to act as a guide and translator. However, due to the sensitive nature of the case, the guide changed his mind about going and I had to make new arrangements.

Access to the site of field research was also a factor I had to consider. As mentioned, I limited my stay in the village because I expected local authorities to keep a close watch on foreigners and I worried that they might ask me to leave. In China, it is the local government level that is charged with maintaining social stability.³⁴ In order to maintain social stability, local governments and police have several methods to deter and detect instances of social unrest, including Internet censorship, paid informants, security contractors, neighborhood watchdog groups and the harassment of activists.³⁵ However, my stay in the village was much

³⁰ Cai (2010, p.3)

³¹ Saich (2011, p.234)

³² Lee (1993, p.4)

³³ Lee (1993, p.1)

³⁴ Saich (2011, p.206)

³⁵ Trevaskes (2012)

less problematic than I had feared and in many ways I felt my fieldwork research was needlessly constrained by this. But as Lee states: “Typically, field researchers do not know what they are going to find until they have actually entered the field (...).”³⁶

The inclination of villagers in Wukan to participate in interviews might be diminished by their fear of government reprimand. As Cai notes, “popular contention is by no means an easy or safe undertaking in China.”³⁷ I was warned several times by Chinese academics in Guangzhou that the topic of my thesis was ‘sensitive’ (敏感 *mingan*). This could limit the collection of data in the field. This means that even if villagers agree to be interviewed on a sensitive subject, they may not be completely honest in their answers. They might assume my values are unsympathetic, fear negative criticism or question my motives as an outsider.

Disclosure of the truth can potentially harm the respondent and sometimes people feel uncomfortable talking about certain topics, and this is what makes interview questions sensitive. In order to conduct interviews on sensitive subjects, “privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude are important because they provide a framework of trust.”³⁸ In this regard, it was not surprising that some interview subjects would not let me make an audio recording of the interview. A small village population such as in Wukan makes the matter of confidentiality more difficult. However, this is arguably the case for many areas of research in China, not just sensitive issues. Despite some problems, and even though there was a chance that respondents in Wukan did not provide entirely truthful answers, several other factors made me confident that I had obtained fairly reliable data. I consider living with a local family as particularly important in this regard.

1.6 Staying with a host family in Wukan village

Staying with a local family had several benefits, most notably the opportunity to see how people interact, communicate and how they go about their daily lives. Moreover, getting to know the family and the other villagers in a more relaxed setting, and over an extended period of time, may have served to ensure the same standard of data as more open, non-sensitive research topics. It afforded an opportunity to see how people responded to questions before and after they got to know me, and this proved important to my analysis. Staying several days with a host family made it easier to ask more sensitive questions, because it gave me time to

³⁶ Lee (1993, p.28-29)

³⁷ Cai (2010, p.1)

³⁸ Lee (1993, p.98)

establish a sense of trust with the interview subject and not ask every question at once. As sociologist Ned Polsky writes; “Before you can ask questions, or even speak much at all other than when spoken to, you should get the ‘feel’ of their world by extensive and attentive listening – get some sense of what pleases them and what bugs them, some sense of their frame of reference, and some sense of *their* sense of language.”³⁹ Additionally, living with a local family means I did not have to register my passport at a hotel and risk having the local police know I was there and for how long.

However, this situation had some downsides. I worried that my access might have been somewhat constrained by my main informant, Wei. Wei became what is often referred to as a ‘gatekeeper’- someone who is able to grant or refuse access to the field.⁴⁰ His chaperonage on the first day constrained some of my efforts to conduct interviews with more people, mostly because he was keen on showing me the village and introducing me to his friends. As his houseguest I felt obligated to follow his lead and let him set the pace. I therefore decided to spend the next two days on my own, and despite my sense of comfort in being more independent, I actually conducted more interviews with Wei’s chaperonage than without.

Wei’s family also informed me that they regularly let journalists stay with them, and this made me a bit apprehensive. How can they afford this? Are they being paid by the police to report on my visit later on? How will long exposure to journalists affect their interview answers? I have no evidence that suggests Wei’s family were anything other than extremely hospitable, but I have had some doubts. As Lily Tsai points out: “Sometimes there may be pressures on respondents to decline answering a question or to give only a vague answer. At other times, there may be pressure for respondents to avoid answering a question and yet appear as if they are answering the question to the best of their ability.”⁴¹ As a researcher, it is important to consider the possibility that interview subjects have incentives to give certain answers.

I would argue that the advantages of staying with a host family outweighed the disadvantages. Being able to join my host family and their friends for a documentary screening was very useful to my research, and would not have been possible if I had spent the evening at a hotel outside of the village. This valuable experience, and the level of trust I enjoyed as their guest, was crucial to the success of my fieldwork research.

³⁹ Polsky (2006, p.128)

⁴⁰ Silverman (2010, p.434)

⁴¹ Tsai (2010, p.252)

1.7 Self-censorship and interviewer expectations

One of the challenges of doing fieldwork research is the researcher's own feelings and inhibitions. My status as visitor and stranger, or as most people assumed; journalist, is clear from my appearance. I reminded people that I was a student and not a journalist, but they did not care too much about this. Many expressed views that my research would be beneficial in some way. The informants said that my research and interest in the Wukan Incident would help them "spread the word" and improve academic research on China abroad. From this it seems clear that my presence in the field influences the interview subjects, but to what extent does it influence what I experience?

As this was a sensitive research subject, it was difficult to ask certain questions. For example, I thought it was difficult to ask what they thought about the new village committee leadership. Lee describes how common it is for interviewers to feel "uncomfortable about asking questions" and the importance of not attaching too much significance to sensitive questions. According to Lee, "[interviewers] who did not expect difficulties obtained higher levels of report on sensitive questions – of the order of 5 to 30 per cent depending on the question- than those who expected difficulty."⁴²

1.8 Conclusion

This thesis is based on qualitative research methods, primarily semi-structured interviews, observations, as well as analysis of texts and audiovisual data. I have chosen to do a case study of one example of a mass incident, the Wukan Incident, to find out more about the broader phenomena of rural unrest in China. Issues of political sensitivity may complicate the collection of qualitative data in rural China in various ways. Most notably, it was difficult to plan ahead, not knowing how the local authorities would react to my presence or how villagers would respond to my interview questions. The sensitive nature of the subject also meant that I had very little time in Wukan and therefore much fewer interviews than I would have had in an ideal situation. However, I am confident that staying with a local family and building trust was an important strategy for producing reliable data. Understanding a complex social phenomenon such as the Wukan Incident has required a wide variety of sources, in order to crosscheck my findings from the interviews with observations and text studies.

⁴² Lee (1993, p.101)

2 The Wukan Incident and rural unrest in China

In this chapter I will provide background information of the Wukan Incident and compare Wukan to other cases of social unrest. Placing the Wukan Incident in a wider context will better our understanding of what happened and why. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I have limited my selection of literature on the subject of mass incidents to media reports and Chinese academic publications about the Wukan Incident. In order to consider Wukan in a greater historical context, I have also considered contributions from a few authors in the field of social unrest and political development in China.

In this thesis, I will use the terms ‘local governments’, ‘local authorities’ or ‘local government level’ to refer to the three-level administrative network below the province level in China; prefectures, counties and cities, and townships and districts.⁴³ I will refer to the specific local government (e.g. the Lufeng municipal government) when it is necessary for the context. According to the Constitution (1982), the village committee (村民委员会 *cunmin weiyuanhui* / 村委会 *cunweihui*) is a mass organization of self-management at the basic level, and is not a local government level.⁴⁴

2.1 Background: The Wukan Incident

Prelude

Though the 21st of September 2011 marked the first date of major confrontation between villagers and local authorities, the collective land dispute can be traced back as far as the early 1990s. The *South China Morning Post* described the riots and protests in Wukan as “20 years of anger unleashed”.⁴⁵

Wukan is an administrative village in Donghai Township (东海), Lufeng City (陆丰市), Guangdong province.⁴⁶ The Wukan village area has a population of 11,689.⁴⁷ Wukan is a natural harbor, and many villagers rely on fishing as their main income.

⁴³ Saich (2011, p.180)

⁴⁴ The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982, art. 111)

⁴⁵ Wang (Jan 4, 2012)

⁴⁶ “Administrative village” means that it is a self-governing community below the lowest level of formal government, the township.

⁴⁷ Zeng (2013, p.20)



Picture 1: Map showing Wukan village, Guangdong province. Retrieved from: <http://lunghu.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/wukan-do.png> Accessed: 24.05.2014

Up until the Wukan Incident, which began on September 21 in 2011, Wukan was a village in which political power was under the control of one family, or clan. Xue Chang had acted as Party Secretary to the Wukan Party Branch and leader of the Wukan village committee for forty-one consecutive years.

In the early 1990s, the village and the region experienced rapid economic development, partly as a result of the establishment of the Lufeng, Donghai Economic Development Zone.⁴⁸ Xue Chang established the Wukan Harbor Industrial Development Company Ltd (乌坎港事业开发公司 *Wukan Gang Shiye Kaifa Gongsi*) on October 4, 1992, an enterprise under collective ownership which was approved by the Lufeng city government in 1993. This approval consented that Wukan Harbor Industrial Development Company Ltd had the right to develop 800,000 m² of Wukan's port area in cooperation with Hong Kong business magnate Chen Wenqing. It was the establishment of the Wukan Harbor Industrial Development Company and the start of large-scale land development in the region that constituted the real starting point of the collective land dispute between Wukan villagers and

⁴⁸ Zeng (2013, p.21)

the village committee.⁴⁹ According to one report, “the village of Wukan sold off 258 plots of collective land between 1993 and 2011, and the income from compensation was 22,706,445 yuan (...)”.⁵⁰ Despite this huge profit, the Wukan villagers have received very little compensation in the past twenty years, only two payments of 50 yuan and 500 yuan, respectively.⁵¹

On April 3, 2009, a flyer entitled “A Letter to the Dear Villagers of Wukan: We are not the Slaves of a Dead Village” was distributed in the village.⁵² The flyer provided information about the illegal land sale and was signed ‘Patriot No.1’ (爱国者 1 号 *Aiguoazhe 1 hao*) and a QQ contact number.⁵³ Over the course of the next few months, young Wukan residents communicated with the still-unknown author of the flyer on QQ.⁵⁴

One of the online discussion groups started by Patriot No.1, the Wukan Hot-Blooded Youth Group (乌坎热血青年团 *Wukan rexue qingnian tui*), became the main forum for discussion of the corrupt use of land in Wukan. Zhuang Liehong, a villager in his thirties, convinced some of the young people of Wukan to appeal to the authorities.⁵⁵ Zhuang Liehong led as many as eleven trips to petition a total of fourteen departments at the Guangdong provincial government, Shanwei municipality (汕尾市), Lufeng municipality and Donghai township.⁵⁶ After two years of fruitless petitions and visits to various levels of government, the group decided to change tactics. The group started contacting other villagers in person, and invited them to participate at a villagers’ general meeting on September 21, 2011.

The Wukan Incident of September 21, 2011

On September 21, about 4,000 Wukan residents gathered outside the village committee compound and asked Xue Chang for the release of the land sale documents and village financial accounts. Since no villager had been consulted on the matter and there had been no compensation, people wanted more transparency from their local village committee. People carried banners, gongs and flags and shouted in unison; “return our farmland” and “overthrow

⁴⁹ Zeng (2013, p.22)

⁵⁰ Zeng (2013, p.30)

⁵¹ Zeng (2013, p.30), Zhao (2013, p.53)

⁵² “给乌坎乡亲们的一封信: 我们不做亡村奴”

⁵³ *Tencent QQ*, popularly known as *QQ* is China’s most popular instant messaging service and the largest online chat community in the world.

⁵⁴ Chen (2012)

⁵⁵ Zeng (2013, pps.32-33)

⁵⁶ Zeng (2013, p.34)

corrupt officials”.⁵⁷ The villagers went to the Country Garden Development Project in Hetai Industrial park to ask them to stop construction on the disputed land areas, but there was no one in charge to talk to.⁵⁸ They continued their demonstration to the Lufeng municipal building, a couple of kilometers away. Cai Sen, deputy party secretary of Lufeng city, explained that the contracts were not signed and the land was not sold yet, and that the Lufeng municipal government would reply to the villagers of Wukan within 10 days.⁵⁹ Even though both the Lufeng municipal government and the Wukan village committee both said that they had not sold the land to Country Garden, the villagers questioned this because they had observed Country Garden workers surveying the land.⁶⁰ The villagers then returned to Wukan to ask more questions of Xue Chang and the village committee, but since he was not there, the mob sacked the village committee office. A large mob went back to Hetai park and some of the younger villagers started throwing bricks at the security office there.⁶¹ Next, the villagers blocked up the public roads and “in a fit of anger (...) smashed up the Fengtian Livestock farm, the restaurant on the waterfront and the Furong government factory of Chen Wenqing.”⁶²

The next day, riot police arrived in the village; ostensibly to protect another building owned by the Hong Kong businessman Chen Wenqing, based on a rumor that people wanted to destroy Chen’s property. In the name of “protecting social order”, the Shanwei municipal government dispatched a large-scale police force of 200 ordinary and armed police.⁶³ This led to the first violent confrontation between police and villagers. Using bricks and steel pipes the village mob surrounded the police station and overturned nine police vehicles. Dozens of villagers and police officers were injured in these clashes.⁶⁴

Period of self-governance

After the riots of September 22, a spokesperson and protest leader emerged. Lin Zuluan, aged 67, was a member of the CCP who had once been in the military and a cadre both in Wukan

⁵⁷ Chen (2012)

⁵⁸ Chen (2012)

⁵⁹ Chen (2012), Zeng (2013, p.41)

⁶⁰ Zeng (2013, p.41, p.42)

⁶¹ Chen (2012)

⁶² Zeng (2013, p.42)

⁶³ Zeng (2013, pps.43-44)

⁶⁴ Zeng (2013, p.45)

village and in the town of Donghai. He had not participated in the September 21 and 22 incidents, but enjoyed a lot of respect in the village and decided to take the lead.⁶⁵

At this point the villagers demanded new local village committee elections, claiming that previous elections were fraudulent and in violation of the Organic Law on the Villagers' Committee of the People's Republic of China of 4 November 1998 (Organic Law). The Organic Law consists of 30 articles that set out the rules under which Chinese villagers may organize and govern their villages. Wukan villagers claimed that Xue Chang had not been elected in accordance with Article 3 of the Organic Law, which stipulates "the villagers' committee is established in accordance with the villagers' situation of residence, number of population, and the principle of facilitating the self-government of the masses."⁶⁶ Even though the original Organic Law was passed in 1987, large parts of Guangdong, Yunnan, Guangxi and Hainan only began holding elections in the late 1990s, often due to local Party cadres who claimed it would slow economic growth and harm administrative efficiency.⁶⁷

The Organic Law expressly allows voters to contest unlawful elections by filing reports with local governments. Wukan residents also claimed the village committee had violated Article 12 of the Organic Law, which states: "Any member of the Villager's Election Committee nominated as candidate for the Village Committee should withdraw from the Villagers' Election Committee".⁶⁸

The villagers elected a temporary board of village representatives (村民代表临时理事会 *cunmin daibiao linshi lishihui*) on September 29 with 117 representatives.⁶⁹ Thirteen council members were elected to head the negotiation with local authorities and put forth demands. In order to remove the corrupt officials from office, the villagers sought and found evidence of election fraud and documents that proved the illegal land sale. On November 14, the board submitted a document to the Lufeng City National People's Congress Standing Committee with a list of land areas that had been destroyed.

Further demonstrations and subsequent arrests

The Lufeng government response was to organize a working group and send them to Wukan to investigate the claims of corruption. However, according to an *iSun TV* documentary, the Lufeng government also sent staff to Wukan to collect signatures from villagers that attested

⁶⁵ Zeng (2013, p.49)

⁶⁶ The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (1998, revised 2010)

⁶⁷ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.60)

⁶⁸ The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (1998, revised 2010)

⁶⁹ Chen (2012)

that the incident on September 21 had been resolved.⁷⁰ This attempt to cover up and quell further protests angered the villagers.

The board of village representatives therefore decided to organize a second collective petition march. On November 21, a well-organized petition march started in the early morning with about 4,000 people participating. Deputy mayor of Lufeng city, Qiu Jinxiong, accepted the petition letter and promised that the Lufeng municipal government would give Wukan residents a “satisfactory reply”⁷¹. However, during the first week of December, the Shanwei municipal government declared the temporary board of village representatives in Wukan an illegal organization. Plainclothes policemen arrested four well-known protesters, Zhuang Liehong, Zhang Jiancheng, Hong Ruichao and Xue Jinbo, without warrant on December 9. The standoff between villagers and police escalated when one of the protest leaders, 42-year-old Xue Jinbo, died in police custody two days later. The official cause of death, confirmed by head of the ER at Yihui Jijin Hospital, Wang Daoliang, was sudden cardiac arrest.⁷² But his family said Xue’s body had heavy bruising and his thumbs had been pulled back and broken, and were suspicious about the true cause of death.⁷³ Police surrounded the village and the villagers put up barricades as if under siege, though the authorities did not cut off water supplies and electricity.

On December 22, after almost six months of protesting, Guangdong Deputy Provincial Party Secretary Zhu Mingguo, the province’s third-ranking cadre, negotiated a settlement with Lin Zuluan, the chief village representative. While the full details of the agreement were not disclosed, Lin Zuluan and other village representatives indicated Zhu Mingguo had affirmed the villagers’ right to protests.⁷⁴ The ‘provisional administration’ headed by Lin Zuluan was recognized. Several Wukan activists who had clashed with the police were released and the riot police withdrew. A new village committee was elected in March 2012, but by March 2014 they still had not succeeded in returning the land to the local farmers; the assets remain frozen, pending negotiations between the central government and Wukan leaders.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Chen (2012)

⁷¹ Chen (2012)

⁷² Chen (2012), Zeng (2013, p.72)

⁷³ Zeng (2013, pps.72-73)

⁷⁴ Lam (Jan 11, 2012)

⁷⁵ Hui (Mar 03, 2014)

Aftermath

I will use ‘Wukan Incident’ to refer to the series of protests and the period of unrest in Wukan village between September 2011 and March 2012. However, the conflict between Wukan villagers and the local government level is still an on-going process. Due to the limitations of this thesis, I will not consider any developments that happened after March 31, 2014.

Since the Wukan village committee elections in March 2012, there has been a change in provincial leadership in Guangdong. Though the government response and the village election generated a debate on what this means for political reform in China, it seems clear that investigating the land dispute is not on the new provincial leadership’s agenda.⁷⁶

Furthermore, in March 2014, the *South China Morning Post* reported that one of the former village leaders was appointed by higher-level authorities in Donghai township to be the next deputy party secretary, while four of his associates would also be part of the nine-member Wukan party branch. The reappointment of local cadres who were exposed as corrupt only a few years ago, indicates the provincial leadership has lost interest in the Wukan case and might be a sign that the Wukan party branch intends to take over the Wukan village committee by expelling its leaders.⁷⁷ In March 2014, two village committee members were arrested on charges of corruption.⁷⁸ Zhuang Liehong has publically claimed that he is Patriot No.1 and has sought political asylum in the United States.⁷⁹ These developments are a major setback for the villagers’ cause and suggest there might be a smaller chance of settling the land dispute.

2.2 Media coverage of the Wukan Incident and the ‘Wukan model’

Due to the sensitive nature of political protests, coverage of the Wukan Incident in domestic Chinese newspapers was quite limited. Chinese language coverage of the incident was overwhelmingly provided by Hong Kong based newspapers, and not by newspapers in Mainland China.⁸⁰ Thus, I have chosen to focus on foreign media reports in this section.

Foreign media coverage of the incident was primarily focused on issues such as democracy and state-society relations.⁸¹ In several articles, the Wukan Incident is described as

⁷⁶ Hui (Jan 16, 2013)

⁷⁷ Hui (Mar 03, 2014)

⁷⁸ Hui (Mar 14, 2014), Jie (Mar 20, 2014)

⁷⁹ Hui (Mar 26, 2014)

⁸⁰ Bandurski (Dec 19, 2011)

⁸¹ Jacob and Anderlini (Jan 30, 2012), Fung (Sept 23, 2012), Hui (Jan 16, 2013), The Economist (Oct 20, 2012)

a land dispute that led to calls for elections and an end to corruption.⁸² *The Atlantic* calls the protests in Wukan “an uprising that gave birth to the [democratic] experiment”.⁸³ This type of phrasing emphasizes the outcome of the land problem, instead of focusing on the initial problem of illegal land expropriation. Another trend in the foreign media coverage was the description of the Wukan Incident as a unique case; a new movement or political development. The headline “Wukan offers democratic model for China” in the *Financial Times* was one of many that helped spark a political debate about whether or not the government had adopted a new approach in dealing with social unrest.⁸⁴ These early news commentaries seemed to suggest that Wukan was a special case, and the way it was handled by locals and government officials could be seen as an example for other officials to follow. This is known as the ‘Wukan model’ (乌坎模式 *Wukan moshi*), a phrase attributed to Provincial Party Secretary Wang Yang.⁸⁵ The Wukan Incident was portrayed as an example of a new way of dealing with land grab problems and local government responsibility for the protection of the rights of farmers. In chapter 5, I will discuss how Wukan villagers perceived the media and the protesters’ reliance on news media and social media in communicating their grievances to a wider audience.

2.3 Chinese academic articles: The Wukan case as a land problem

The debate surrounding the ‘Wukan model’ was also evident in several articles written by Chinese scholars. However, there is a clear thematic difference between these Chinese academic papers and the foreign media reports mentioned above. Whereas foreign media focused on issues such as corruption and grassroots democracy in Wukan, academic circles in China regard the Wukan case as a ‘land problem’ (土地问题 *tudi wenti*).⁸⁶ These articles show that Wukan residents made political demands such as demanding new elections, but that the core issue was economic security and that their land was sold for profit by village cadres. It is worth noting that the documentary produced in mainland China focused on the land dispute issue (土地纠纷问题 *tudi jiufen wenti*)⁸⁷, while the *Al-Jazeera* produced documentary

⁸² Lubman (Jan 07, 2012), Fung (Sept 23, 2012), Ran (Dec 16, 2011)

⁸³ Fung (Sept 23, 2012)

⁸⁴ Jacob and Anderlini (Jan 30, 2012)

⁸⁵ Jacob and Anderlini (Jan 30, 2012), Lam (Jan 11, 2012)

⁸⁶ Zhao (2013, p.53), Liang and Li (2012, p.73), Zeng (2013, p.17)

⁸⁷ Ai (2012b)

focused on the question of grassroots democracy and political empowerment of villagers.⁸⁸

Liang Wei argues that the Wukan Incident went from being a protest about economic demands to a protest with a mixture of economic and political demands.⁸⁹ He says this is due to the increasing social and economic development in China, which has brought with it higher levels of rights consciousness and life expectations, not unlike many 'Western' countries.⁹⁰

The foreign media portrayed the Wukan Incident as a special, new case, while Chinese academics regard the Wukan Incident as an example of more endemic problems in rural China. For example, Zhao Yang regards the Wukan Incident as a symptom of the problem of poor implementation of policy and the subsequent social trust crisis in China.⁹¹ Zeng Zhimin vaguely refers to the problem of 'future development' in the countryside and the importance of building the organizational capacity of the new leadership in Wukan.⁹² However, it seems clear that his extensive documentation of what happened in Wukan is an effort to improve government response to similar cases in the future. Liang, on the other hand, argues that the people's growing rights consciousness, the improved organizational abilities of protesters and the trend of economic rights demands turning into a mixture of economic and political rights demands, are important considerations when resolving such conflicts. These developments will make future mass incidents very difficult to handle, and Liang therefore argues that the government must properly address the people's demand for rights if they are to maintain stability.⁹³ In many ways, this way of thinking resembles arguments made by Yu Jianrong, in his article *Reassessing Chinese Society's 'Rigid Stability'*, though Yu is much more critical of the central government's emphasis on stability maintenance. However, Yu does not base his arguments on the Wukan case, but on the general policy of social stability maintenance.

2.4 Land issues and property rights in China

Even though the foreign media's emphasis on the Wukan model suggests otherwise, one might argue that the Wukan Incident was far from a special case.⁹⁴ In many ways, Wukan was just another case of land expropriation. Elizabeth Perry cautions against attaching too much significance to new, seemingly different types of protests or outcomes: "In light of China's

⁸⁸ Lee and Leong (2012)

⁸⁹ Liang (2012, p.94)

⁹⁰ Liang (2012, pps.94-95)

⁹¹ Zhao (2013, p.54)

⁹² Zeng (2013, pps.100-101)

⁹³ Liang (2012, p.95)

⁹⁴ Lam (Jan 11, 2012)

rich and variegated traditions of resistance, rebellion, and revolution, we should be duly skeptical of claims (...) that new outbursts of protest represent a fundamental break with the past.”⁹⁵

In recent years, the forced requisition of land has been a major source of conflict between Chinese citizens and local authorities. Court cases, petitions and protests in China are often due to disputes over land. Yu claims more than 65 per cent of all mass incidents that deal with defending rights (维权 *weiquan*) are related to land use disputes.⁹⁶ Other reports show a high percentage of land use disputes among cases of rural unrest. For example, among the 150 cases of rural unrest in Cai’s research, 66 cases (or 44 per cent) concerned farmer’s collective resistance to land use.⁹⁷ A recent Landesa Rural Development Institute survey, which surveyed farmers in seventeen provinces in China, shows that 43.1 per cent of all villages have experienced takings of land for non-agricultural purposes (e.g. urban construction) since the late 1990s.⁹⁸

From this it seems clear that rural land use disputes are widespread and chronic. This obvious recurring theme begs the question; why does the local government still seize rural land? In order to understand the problem of land expropriation in China, one must understand Chinese land law and the opportunities and incentives for local governments to ignore these laws. Since 1978, the reform era has moved China towards the establishment of a market economy with new international trading policies. Guangdong is one of the provinces that benefited the most from opening and reform.⁹⁹ However, the local governments in rural areas have been under intense pressure to modernize and develop their localities.¹⁰⁰ The pressure on local governments increased further after the abolishment of the agricultural tax in 2004, which further limited the revenues of local governments.¹⁰¹ This is now a major challenge for local governments. They need the profit from land sales in order to build roads, industrial compounds, and expansion of cities.¹⁰² Local governments are also expected to provide health services, education and infrastructure.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, most local administrations are heavily in debt, partly due to investments in infrastructure and property-related ventures.

⁹⁵ Perry (2002, pps.x-xi)

⁹⁶ Yu (2009, p.116)

⁹⁷ Cai (2010, p.57)

⁹⁸ Landesa Rural Development Institute (2011)

⁹⁹ Saich (2011, p.190)

¹⁰⁰ Bernstein and Lü (2003, p.8)

¹⁰¹ Saich (2011, p.204)

¹⁰² Hansen and Thøgersen (2008, p.110)

¹⁰³ Hansen and Thøgersen (2008, p.112), Bernstein and Lü (2003, p.8)

There is a structure of financial incentives for local governments to set up township enterprises and attract foreign direct investment, and land acquisition and land sales have become a major source of local government income.¹⁰⁴ The numbers show how dependent local governments are on rural land expropriation: Land concession income comprised between 36% to nearly 70% of annual local government revenue over the past ten years.¹⁰⁵ During the period from 2008 to 2010 profits from sale of land use rights increased in absolute terms from 436 billion yuan to 1.22 trillion yuan.¹⁰⁶

The dependence on revenue from land sales helps explain why local governments continue to illegally sell off village land for construction, despite the risk of protests. Furthermore, the income from land sales is a major incentive to ignore and suppress rural protests. In *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*, Cai argues that local governments tend to ignore protests against land expropriation because it incurs a huge economic loss for the local government.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps particularly in the coastal regions where economic development pushes up real estate prices, local authorities are tempted to appropriate collectively owned land in order to facilitate land planning and urban construction. Land seizures orchestrated by corrupt government officials in collusion with property developers, as happened in Wukan, are not unusual. There is a trend among local officials to exploit their position in order to make business deals; so-called ‘entrepreneur – initiated corruption’.¹⁰⁸ Some even claim that the local government attitude towards peasants is ‘predatory’.¹⁰⁹ The result is a continuous conflict between the interests of the local government and the villagers. The tense and complicated relationship between peasants and the local governments is also evident in the Wukan case.

So far we have seen the incentives that compel local governments to turn to land expropriation to raise funds. In theory, legal statutes keep cadres and developers from forcing villagers to leave their properties and land without adequate compensation. However, the legal framework is based on vaguely defined property rights. According to articles 9 and 10 of the Constitution (1982), natural resources and urban land are state-owned.¹¹⁰ Suburban and rural land is collectively owned, unless state ownership has been proven. However, it is the

¹⁰⁴ Zhang and 李静君 (2012, p.9)

¹⁰⁵ The World Bank and China’s State Council Development Research Center (March 25, 2014, p.202)

¹⁰⁶ The World Bank and China’s State Council Development Research Center (March 25, 2014, p.202)

¹⁰⁷ Cai (2010, p.187)

¹⁰⁸ Levy (2007, p.34)

¹⁰⁹ Bernstein and Lü (2003)

¹¹⁰ The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982)

ambiguous definition of collective ownership that muddles the issue of property rights in China. Who makes up the collective? The confusion about collective ownership is arguably a result of the many ownership shifts after the decollectivization period in China.¹¹¹ During the 1980s, China underwent major reforms in the agricultural sector and dismantled the collective production teams and ‘people’s communes’. Put simply, the three basic administrative units in the state were replaced and ownership of collective land was transferred to a new unit. The township/town (乡 *xiang* / 镇 *zhen*) replaced the commune, the administrative village (行政村 *xingzhengcun*) replaced the production brigade, and the natural village (自然村 *zirancun*) or the villagers’ group (村民小组 *cunmin xiaozu*) replaced the production team.¹¹² Since the production team owned the land before decollectivization, the natural village group was left responsible for the management of rural land after the reforms. However, there has been a lot of uncertainty about which collective level actually holds the title to the land, and this imprecise definition of collective ownership allows local governments to claim the land.

Perhaps as an effort to avoid social conflict, there have been substantial changes in government policy regarding the non-agricultural use of farmland since the early 2000s.¹¹³ For example, the Contracting of Rural Land Law of 2003 (Land Law) gave farmers the legal guarantee of contracted land use rights for 30 years. The same law also allowed them to transfer contracted land, transfer titles of land and rent land. This was a major step in property rights. According to Cai, significant adjustments to the 1998 Land Law in 2004, 2005 and 2006 have revised the criteria for compensation and limited local governments’ power.¹¹⁴

Regardless of these changes, not even the Land Law provides a definition of who makes up the “collective”. This means there is a significant danger that local village cadres may abuse the collective ownership rights of villagers.¹¹⁵ Peter Ho calls this problem of defining collective ownership as ‘deliberate institutional ambiguity’ and claims local governments take advantage of this to force through land sales.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, there are still many legal restrictions in place with regards to the sale and rental of rural land. The only way peasants can legally profit from their land is to sell it to the government. Commercial

¹¹¹ Ho (2001, p.401)

¹¹² Ho (2001, p.405)

¹¹³ For an overview of changes to China’s land law, see The World Bank and China’s State Council Development Research Center (March 25, 2014, Box 3.1 The Evolution of China’s Policy Framework for Land from 1978 to 2013, pps.189-190)

¹¹⁴ Cai (2010, p.158, p.178)

¹¹⁵ Cai (2010, p.53)

¹¹⁶ Ho (2001, p.401)

properties can only be built upon land expropriated by the government. This gives local governments a monopoly in land sale, allowing them to buy land cheap and sell high, thus making a huge profit. From this we see that illegal land appropriation, or lack of compensation for land in rural China, is largely due to vaguely defined property rights and huge profit incentives for local governments.

2.4 How does the Wukan case compare to other mass incidents?

There have been many mass incidents in China in which land rights issues are the root cause of conflict. On December 6th, 2005, there was a violent clash between villagers and police officers in Dongzhou (东洲) village, Shanwei city, Guangdong, due to a land use dispute. Several people were shot and killed by the People's Armed Police and the death toll remains unknown.¹¹⁷ In this case, as in Wukan, the central government did not get involved, but provincial leaders did get involved. According to a *New York Times* report, the villagers in Dongzhou said their conflict with the local government had started when a power company announced plans to build a coal-fired generator that they feared would cause heavy pollution.¹¹⁸ Dongzhou is a fishing village near Hong Kong, and the power plant project threatened to impact the livelihood of fishermen and farmers claimed they had not been compensated for the use of the land for the plant.

Though there were riots and acts of vandalism in Wukan, the Wukan Incident was not very violent compared to the Dongzhou incident in 2005. It is rare for police officers to open fire on protesters in China.¹¹⁹ It is not so uncommon for law enforcement agencies to “abuse power and seriously violate citizens’ rights or even cause deaths.”¹²⁰ Local police often target protest leaders, and it is not unusual that protesters die in police custody. In *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*, Cai discusses cases in which suspects died in police stations where they were detained. When the victims’ families demanded clarification or investigation, their requests were denied outright.¹²¹ These cases are eerily similar to what happened to Wukan resident Xue Jinbo, who died only days after he was detained by the police.

¹¹⁷ Cai (2010, pps.118-119), French (December 9, 2005)

¹¹⁸ French (December 9, 2005)

¹¹⁹ French (December 9, 2005)

¹²⁰ Cai (2010, p.142)

¹²¹ Cai (2010, p.142)

Not only is the root cause of the Wukan Incident similar to other cases of rural unrest; the escalation of events is also comparable to other mass incidents. In Shandong (山东) province, there were tensions in Dujiatuan (杜家疃) village over land expropriation in 2014. The villagers claim 200 *mu* of land was illegally seized¹²², and the villagers feel they have been compensated inadequately. On March 9, 2014, villagers attempted to stop local developers from continuing construction work on the disputed land, and erected a tent at the worksite. They stood guard 24 hours a day in order to stop the construction work and demanded adequate compensation in accordance with the law. On March 21, the tent caught fire, which resulted in the death of one villager and left three others injured. Preliminary reports say arson is suspected because the tent was doused with gas.¹²³ In both Wukan and Dujiatuan village, the villagers were misled or not informed about the sale of land and received inadequate compensation. Furthermore, the villagers of both Wukan and Dujiatuan sought out the help of the village leaders and local government officials first, but eventually decided to go directly to the worksite and attempt to halt the work in progress.

In another case from the 1990s, in a village outside Harbin (哈尔滨市), villagers protested against election fraud and land speculation.¹²⁴ Here, officials from the National People's Congress and the Party Secretary of Harbin lauded the protest and resulting outcome as "increasing democratic awareness in the countryside".¹²⁵ Similarly, in Wukan, the provincial government praised the democratic experiment and said it was an example for others to follow.¹²⁶

Nevertheless, one might argue that the Wukan Incident differs from other mass incidents in a number of ways. Zeng considers the Wukan Incident to be a rare case, citing the duration, the number of participants and the extent to which it was organized.¹²⁷ However, I have found several cases that have similarly high number of participants as the Wukan protests. As recent as October 21, 2013, up to 10,000 villagers in Lintong (莲塘), Guangdong province protested in front of local government buildings because of a dispute over the sale of village lands by corrupt officials.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Zeng argues that the duration of the collective protests may have been a bit long, and indeed, the Wukan protesters engaged in

¹²² 1 *mu* (亩 *mu*) = 614,4 m²

¹²³ Li (March 23, 2014)

¹²⁴ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.58)

¹²⁵ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.59)

¹²⁶ Lam (Jan 11, 2012)

¹²⁷ Zeng (2013, p.18)

¹²⁸ Feng (Oct 21, 2013)

contentious actions for more than six months. This is not too unusual, however. There are cases where protesters participate in collective action against the government for much longer periods of time. According to Xi Chen; “Compared to rebellious periods in history, (...) the contention we see today is not particularly striking in frequency, scale or disruptiveness.”¹²⁹ In *Between Defiance and Obedience: Protest opportunism in China*, Chen showcases four different petitioning groups that engaged in extensive contentious interactions with the city government for at least one year.¹³⁰

Other literature on the topic of rural resistance in China has also considered contemporary protests in the light of the greater historical context. Authors such as Perry, Brantly Womack, Thomas Bernstein and Xiabo Lü all argue that contemporary rural protests are similar to those of the dynastic era and Republican China, or are at least influenced by China’s traditional past.¹³¹ China has a long history of social protest and one might even argue collective protests are “culturally sanctioned”.¹³²

2.5 Conclusion

The Wukan Incident was a widely reported case in international news media, and I found that these reports focused on political participation in China and Wukan as a new, different case. In contrast, Chinese academic publications argued that the Wukan Incident was first and foremost a land problem, and were far more concerned with the implications for how the government should handle mass incidents in the future. Though Liang argues for the importance of listening to peasants’ demands, these articles lack a discussion of land reform and other possibilities for policy change. Instead, these articles focus on analyzing the developments during the Wukan Incident that may help the local and central government solve other cases of rural unrest.

Illegal land expropriation is a major cause of rural unrest. There is a financial incentive structure for local governments to expropriate land and an ambiguous legal framework enables them to do so. This chapter has shown that neither the underlying issues in the Wukan case nor the protest itself are all that unique. The Wukan Incident is comparable to many other cases of rural unrest in China in terms of core issue and protester demands, scale,

¹²⁹ Chen (2007, p.253)

¹³⁰ Chen (2007, p.257)

¹³¹ Perry (2002), Womack (1991), Bernstein and Lü (2003)

¹³² Perry (2002, p.xxiii)

and duration. It is therefore reasonable to assume a case study of the Wukan Incident may shed light on contemporary unrest in rural China.

3 Theoretical framework: Rightful resistance

The theoretical framework for this thesis is provided by the theory of rightful resistance, as put forth by O'Brien and Li. In this chapter I will give an overview of some useful theoretical concepts from their research that have helped me analyze the data collected from the field. I will also discuss some critiques and limitations of the theory of rightful resistance.

According to Silverman, "theory provides both a framework for critically understanding phenomena and a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized."¹³³ I have chosen the theory of rightful resistance because it can explain how destabilizing and disruptive rural protests can occur even in an authoritarian state whose first priority is 'stability at all costs'.¹³⁴ One Chinese scholar claims mass incidents are "organized by people with the same or similar interests or opinions to seek legal rights and interests with *illegal* methods or means and have a large social *harmfulness*".¹³⁵ Conversely, the theory of rightful resistance explains how protesters are often tolerated because they use near-legal means and are perceived as harmless or even beneficial to central government oversight.

The multilayered bureaucratic structure in the Chinese state leads to a large gap between the authorities at higher and lower levels. This means that there is often a problem of information getting lost between the political leadership and local officials, or a problem with local officials who seek to hide information from the higher levels. It is difficult for the higher levels to monitor and assess how a policy is being implemented, and the central government is plagued by local officials who ignore or neglect policy programs.¹³⁶ At the same time, the division between local and central government also allows the central government to blame endemic problems in the system, such as corruption and poor implementation of policy, on a few bad eggs at the ground-level.

Misimplementation of policy could potentially ruin Party legitimacy, but by using the different layers in the political structure to their advantage, the central government can get rid of a few local officials and remove any cause to believe there is a structural problem in the system. This way, the central government can use the divide as a mechanism to warn local

¹³³ Silverman (2010, p.110)

¹³⁴ Yu (2012)

¹³⁵ Wang (2006) Emphasis added.

¹³⁶ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.28), Yu (2012), Zhao (2013, p.54)

officials about abusing power and protect the legitimacy of the CCP.¹³⁷

3.1 What is rightful resistance?

As seen in the previous chapter, media reports and academic discourse on the subject of mass incidents in China often focus on policy implications, state-society relations, grass-roots democracy and political participation. O'Brien and Li also consider these topics, but have focused on trying to identify trends among and similarities between different episodes of rural unrest, such as who the activists were, what tactics they used and how important it was to win support from outside the village.¹³⁸ In *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, the question of why people protest is not as important as how people protest. O'Brien and Li have found that the central government shows a willingness to tolerate local protest and social movements as long as they do not directly challenge the Party's claim to power.¹³⁹ Furthermore, they argue that many episodes of rural protests in China can be seen as one type of social movement or protest, and they call this phenomenon 'rightful resistance'. Rightful resistance is defined as "a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public."¹⁴⁰ To put it more simply; 'operating near the boundary of authorized channels' means that villagers are perhaps not strictly adhering to legal forms of action such as petitioning or going to the courts to make their case, but organize sit-ins or demonstrations for example. 'Employing the rhetoric of the powerful' basically means that villagers make use of the law or the political ideology of the Party to frame their claims, such as citing the Organic Law to call for local elections. 'Locating and exploiting divisions within the state' means that villagers realize that there is an opportunity to target local officials and try to get help from the central government. Lastly, 'mobilizing support from the public' often entails inviting journalists and contacting news stations to spread the word about their plight against injustice.

O'Brien and Li provide many examples of rightful resistance, but most of them focus on showcasing one or two attributes, such as how villagers try to make use of the central-local government divide or how they use the law or statements from party officials to justify their

¹³⁷ Cai (2010, p.117)

¹³⁸ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.xii)

¹³⁹ Perry and Selden (2010, p.18)

¹⁴⁰ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.2)

claims. Thus, O'Brien and Li provide few examples of rural protests in China that demonstrate all the elements from the definition of rightful resistance. Even though O'Brien and Li's research relies on data from China, they do not consider rightful resistance a strictly Chinese phenomenon. For example, O'Brien and Li view the effort to win equal pay for women workers in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s as a perfect example of rightful resistance.¹⁴¹ Though this is a case based on Michael McCann's research, O'Brien and Li argue that the pay equity campaign demonstrates all the key attributes of rightful resistance; protesters in this campaign used established law and legal practice to frame their claims, professed loyalty to the political system and sought influential allies.¹⁴² These key elements of rightful resistance will be explored further below.

3.2 Key concepts

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I have selected only some of the concepts mentioned in *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. For example, I have not included the concept of tactical escalation, which shows the variety of ways Chinese protesters change their protest tactics. O'Brien and Li also make many good arguments about how the act of protesting influences the protester and the community, and I will try to incorporate these ideas in my analysis. In this section, however, I will focus my theoretical discussion on three concepts that are closely tied to the definition of rightful resistance, and that might be less self-explanatory.

Rightful claims

The concept of rightful claims demonstrates the first two key elements of rightful resistance; namely that it 'operates near the boundary of authorized channels and employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful'. According to O'Brien and Li, Chinese villagers attempt to defend rights they have already been granted, or rights they believe are evident in the regime's policies, laws, principles, and legitimating ideology.¹⁴³ The rhetoric and strategy employed by protesters allow them to frame their claims in a way that does not challenge the official value system as a whole.¹⁴⁴ In this sense, rightful resistance is "a kind of partially sanctioned protest".¹⁴⁵ For example, in Hebei (河北) province in the early 1990s, a group of

¹⁴¹ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.19-23)

¹⁴² O'Brien and Li (2007, p.22)

¹⁴³ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.xii)

¹⁴⁴ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.17)

¹⁴⁵ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.3)

villagers complained that the village Party branch had nominated all the candidates in an election. They made their case for new elections and electoral candidates that were not nominated by the Party by arguing that villagers would feel like they voted against the party if they voted for other candidates. The villagers said they did not wish to challenge Party rule, and hoped the village Party branch would refrain from proposing candidates.¹⁴⁶ O'Brien and Li call this 'boundary-spanning claims'; claims that do not challenge the state or system, but emphasize loyalty to the Party and humble claims.¹⁴⁷ Making boundary-spanning claims is one of the ways protesters make their claims more reasonable and rightful to the ears of the Party. Protesters "find fault with clear-cut violations of central policies and laws and also subtle instances of manipulation and selective implementation, while targeting cadres who intentionally misread laws, tailor them, or conform to vague, incomplete clauses while ignoring their spirit."¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, O'Brien and Li found that many protest cases used a combination of legal tactics with grass-roots collective action. For example, villagers would start with petitions and visits to different levels of government, then seek other more effective means of drawing attention to their plight when these legal actions showed no results. However, even though people would resort to different tactics, O'Brien and Li argue that rightful resistance does not include those protests that deliberately use violence and force.

In sum, protesters have several means of making rightful claims; making boundary-spanning claims, using both legal means and collective action, but abstain from violent methods. All this helps legitimize their cause in the eyes of the government. The concept of rightful claims offers an important insight into how people protest, how they justify their actions and how they perceive their rights. Furthermore, the concept of rightful claims helps us understand why some episodes of rural unrest are tolerated under China's strict authoritarian rule.

Unpacking the state

In China, officials at different levels in the political system often have divergent interests and are subject to different constraints and incentives.¹⁴⁹ According to O'Brien and Li, the multilevel political bureaucracy in China is a structural opening that makes rightful resistance

¹⁴⁶ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.58)

¹⁴⁷ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.60)

¹⁴⁸ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.60)

¹⁴⁹ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.51)

possible because it allows protesters to exploit divisions within the state.¹⁵⁰ The concept of unpacking the state, or disaggregating the state, demonstrates how Chinese protesters can use this multilayered bureaucracy to their advantage. Unpacking the state means that petitioners try to frame their claims in such a way that it differentiates between different state actors.

O'Brien and Li argue that seeing the state as multilayered is an important part of the political opportunity structure for protests in China.¹⁵¹ Basically, when local officials ignore or violate policy commitments from the CCP, there is an opportunity for instigating a protest. The opportunity is there because the higher level needs information and is willing to hear critique when it is directed at local government officials. So even though rural Chinese protest against the government, their grievances lie with the *local* government, and most rural protests have no intention of challenging the regime.¹⁵² For example, in the case mentioned above concerning the nomination of election candidates in Hebei, the villagers first went to the county civil affairs bureau. Their arguments did not go over well at the township and county level, but instead of going up the hierarchy to the city and provincial level government, they went directly to Beijing to protest the election. At this point, a Ministry of Civil Affairs official responsible for implementing village self-governance heard of their plight, carried out an investigation to look into their case and openly supported the villagers on national television.¹⁵³

From this example we see that the villagers used the local-central government divide to their advantage. They blamed the local village Party branch and sought help from the central government. Furthermore, this example shows that the protesters remain loyal to the central government because they believe the central government can hold local officials accountable. This concept of unpacking the state is important because it challenges our idea of a protest as an unresolved issue between (only) two parties, since the multiple levels of government provide opportunity for protesters to make some levels of government targets and others allies.¹⁵⁴ The strategy of differentiating between local and central government is crucial to our understanding of how protests in China operate and why the central government might condone rightful resistance.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.26)

¹⁵¹ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.48)

¹⁵² Bernstein and Lü (2003, p.13)

¹⁵³ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.58)

¹⁵⁴ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.51-52)

¹⁵⁵ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.65)

Reliance on allies and mobilization of support from greater public

In *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, O'Brien and Li stress the importance of allies and claim that rightful resistance relies heavily on support from the public.¹⁵⁶ Basically, protesters try to find "advocates who are willing to investigate their charges and champion their claims".¹⁵⁷ As we saw in the example from Hebei, the support and help from one Ministry of Civil Affairs official was crucial to the success of the villagers' cause.

Similarly, the role of the media is seen as important with regards to the outcome of a case of rural unrest; the media can be a crucial ally that helps put the spotlight on the protesters cause. Media can also be used to reach a greater audience, which can help put more pressure on the government to respond.¹⁵⁸ However, the idea of the media as an ally is arguably not fully explored by O'Brien and Li. The authors provide few, if any, clear examples of how protesters use the media to spread the word about their protest cause to a wider audience. Based on data from my fieldwork in Wukan I will, in later chapters, provide many examples of how Wukan villagers use the media as a tool to communicate grievances. In light of advances in technology since O'Brien and Li's research was published, I will argue that the use of the Internet and social media is another way of mobilizing support from the public.

3.3 Strengths and limitations of the theory of rightful resistance

O'Brien and Li are not the first to describe situations in which people dispute the authority of some state actors, yet still rely on higher or other authorities to help them pursue their rights. Other scholars in the field of contentious politics have used different terms to describe types of resistance that match that description, for example Andrew Turton's "in-between everyday and exceptional forms of resistance".¹⁵⁹ However, O'Brien and Li have developed his idea further by identifying key attributes of rural protests. While acknowledging that authors such as Perry, Bernstein and Lü provide ample evidence that the conditions for this type of protest has been evident throughout China's history, O'Brien and Li also claim that the reform era has made this form of protest more widespread and more effective.¹⁶⁰ Their theory is strengthened by substantive research on rural protests in post-reform China, and reliance on

¹⁵⁶ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.22)

¹⁵⁷ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.13)

¹⁵⁸ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.68)

¹⁵⁹ Turton (1986, p.36)

¹⁶⁰ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.6, p.11)

government documents. The theory of rightful resistance is based on research from the same field as my own research; rural China. Thus, it has been useful as an analytical framework for understanding the Wukan Incident.

Many scholars agree that O'Brien and Li have made meaningful theoretic contributions to literature on social protest.¹⁶¹ Literature on the subject of social protests, grassroots political reform, and rights awareness often refers to or expands on their work. For example, Cai builds on the idea of a link between structural opportunities for resistance and the local-central divide. Cai claims there are certain conditions that must be met for resistance to be successful, and argues that the different incentives for local and central governments to intervene and punish protests are crucial to our understanding of mass incidents.¹⁶²

Another example of research that uses concepts from the theory of rightful resistance is the essay *Between Defiance and Obedience: Protest opportunism in China* by Xi Chen. Chen develops the idea of opportunistic protesters further. Chen argues that rather than the moderate, non-confrontational form of rural resistance described by O'Brien and Li, there is evidence of a growing trend of more disruptive and trouble-making tactics in cases of urban resistance.¹⁶³

Though the theory of rightful resistance has been well received by many scholars, it has been met with some criticism. O'Brien and Li have investigated the origins, methods and dynamics of rural protest movements, and the purpose of their research is to show how political participation in China operates and how it may be applied to other countries.¹⁶⁴ They admit they do not worry too much about regional variation and that they are 'universalizing' a concept.¹⁶⁵ This is by no means unusual in theory building, but the effort to find a comparative perspective that is applicable to other countries leaves the theory vulnerable to generalization and 'conceptual stretching'.¹⁶⁶ This means that by loosening up concepts, the authors can apply them to additional cases, allowing the concept to travel further.¹⁶⁷

My research findings will indicate more nuanced attributes than those identified by O'Brien and Li because I am taking a relatively broad theory and applying it to a small case. My findings from Wukan suggest that there might be regional variations in cases of social

¹⁶¹ Kennedy (2009, p.609), Goldman (2007, p.497), Wong (2007, p.851), Chen (2009, p.176)

¹⁶² Cai (2010)

¹⁶³ Chen (2007)

¹⁶⁴ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.xii-xiii)

¹⁶⁵ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.xiii, pps.114-115)

¹⁶⁶ Goertz (2006, p.10)

¹⁶⁷ Goertz (2006, p.72)

unrest in China, such as the geographical location of the protest and how this affects the protester's perception of the local and central government. The authors' generalizing approach is a major limitation of the theory of rightful resistance in the Chinese context, and I will address this further in later chapters.¹⁶⁸

Another limitation of using this theory is that the empirical data from O'Brien and Li's research is becoming dated. One of the surveys they conducted dates back to 1999-2001, and many interviews are from Yu Jianrong's research in Hengyang county, Hunan, in 2003.¹⁶⁹ These limitations suggest there is room for updates to the theory. If the theory is to be used as a theoretical framework for analyzing more recent mass incidents one might consider including new variables. For example, one might argue that increased democratic awareness, technological advances and greater access to the Internet, are major factors that differentiate today's protests from those in the early 2000s.

3.4 Conclusion

The theory of rightful resistance provides a framework of logic to help explain how it is possible for these mass incidents to occur in rural China. Rightful resistance is a type of protests that use policy or ideology to frame rights and injustices, but do not directly challenge the political system. The theory of rightful resistance sheds light on a gray area of politics, protests that are neither revolutionary nor solely based on legal methods. The concept of rightful claims helps explain how protesters try to win support from the government and how they perceive their cause. The concept of unpacking the state is crucial to understanding how protesters take advantage of the division between local and central government. The concept of using allies and mobilizing mass support is also an important aspect of rural protests because it shows how protesters are dependent on others to put more pressure on the government.

Though these concepts are useful for understanding rural unrest in China, the question remains whether or not the theory of rightful resistance is still valid. In some cases, the concepts seem too generalized. Furthermore, the nature of mass incidents in rural China is constantly changing and the data used in *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* is somewhat dated. Despite these limitations, the theory of rightful resistance is a good analytical tool and I have used it to interpret and understand interview responses and other findings from Wukan.

¹⁶⁸ Chen (2009, p.178)

¹⁶⁹ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.139-141)

The aim of the next chapters is to analyze how the Wukan villagers perceive the state and the media and evaluate to which extent the Wukan Incident is a type of rightful resistance. The reason why I have chosen to analyze perceptions of the state and the media is because I think they are important to our understanding of mass incidents, and because these social and state forces can easily be tied to the theoretical framework of rightful resistance.

4 Analysis Part I: Perceptions of the local and central government in Wukan village

Before moving to my analysis of how Wukan protesters perceived the different levels of government, I will explain why I do not evaluate the outcome of the Wukan Incident. First of all, the theory of rightful resistance is primarily concerned with the methods, behavior and structural opportunities perceived by protesters, and not so much with the outcome of protests. Secondly, it is very difficult to ascertain exactly how the state or the media has influenced the outcome of a collective protest. Several events may be intertwined and there are too many factors to take into account to be sure of a link between cause and effect. For example, the media and the state may both contribute to an end result and it is difficult to determine who is responsible for what outcome. Though it is difficult to tie different outcomes to specific actions, it *is* possible to find out how villagers perceive the media and the state. Therefore, these chapters deal with how villagers' perceptions may have influenced the nature of the protest.

O'Brien and Li argue that the central government tolerates protests partly because they provide it with intelligence about policy violations, and help it gain oversight of local leaders.¹⁷⁰ For example, the State Bureau for Letters and Visits (国家信访局 *Guojia xinfang ju*) and local people's congresses could be seen as an effort to supervise local leaders.¹⁷¹ The petitions and letters system allows citizens to report on local officials, which gives the central government oversight of local misimplementation of policies.

Given that the central government is aware of this local-central divide and uses it to their advantage, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese citizens make use of this as well. The fieldwork in Wukan has led to some interesting findings with regards to the Wukan villagers' perception of local and central government. As we will see in the following sections, villagers in Wukan very clearly distinguished between the central government level and the local government level. My findings indicate that Wukan residents have a higher faith in the central government than in the local government, even though this trust in the center might be subject to change over time. Moreover, I will argue that my respondents in Wukan had a very abstract way of referring to the different government levels.

¹⁷⁰ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.29)

¹⁷¹ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.29)

4.1 Perception of local government: Nameless corruption

As mentioned previously, the ‘local government’ etc. can be taken to mean the government administrative units below the provincial level, but above the village level. In accordance with the Constitution (1982), the village can be seen as an independently governed organization, and the elected village committee should represent the interests of all villagers. However, my findings from the fieldwork show that people in Wukan often used the term ‘corrupt official’ (贪官 *tangan*) to describe local government officials *and* Wukan village committee members.¹⁷² The rank of ‘official’ (官 *guan*) does not exist at the village level, yet Wukan villagers consistently used terms such as ‘corrupt official’ and ‘village government’ (村政府 *cun zhengfu*) to describe the village committee and its members.



Picture 2: Outside the Wukan village committee office building and compound.
Picture taken by author, 04.11.13

¹⁷² The English-Chinese/Chinese-English dictionary software program *Wenlin* (version 4.0.2, 2011) gives a second meaning of the term 贪官 *tangan* as “avaricious official”.

The fact that Wukan villagers spoke of village cadres as officials, and the village committee as part of local government, could suggest that villagers had little concept of the village committee as a self-governed village organization.¹⁷³ If Wukan villagers had never been given the opportunity to elect their village committee representatives, it stands to reason that they would think of the village committee as an administrative part of the local government, under the township level. On the other hand, the term ‘official’ could simply be used to mean bureaucrat, or politician. It does not necessarily mean that they think of the village committee members as local government officials. Based on findings from the interviews, it is difficult to determine what my respondents meant exactly.

It is clear, however, that there was still a lot of tension and distrust of the local government and even the new village committee members that had been democratically elected. Based on my findings, I will argue that Wukan villagers were disappointed in the previous local village committee leadership, as well as the new freely elected village committee leadership, but for different reasons. Furthermore, the villagers I talked to had a slightly abstract way of talking about the local government at the city and township level.

Not only did the villagers I talked to use the general term for corrupt official, but there was also a clear absence of specific names of persons in local government offices. Interviewee 11 said that they shouted “overthrow corrupt officials” (打倒贪官 *dadao tanguan*) during the demonstrations and wrote it on banners. When I asked who was responsible for the land dispute, respondents mostly used this general term and only sometimes said “the old village committee” (以前的村委会 *yiqian de cunweihui*). In responding to this question, a few respondents mentioned the name of the Hong Kong businessman Chen Wenqing. None of the interview respondents talked about former Party Secretary Wang Yang, who was credited with the decision to intervene in Wukan and who sent his deputy Party Secretary Zhu Mingguo, to negotiate terms with Lin Zuluang. Zhu Mingguo was not mentioned either. Respondents hardly ever mentioned the name of Xue Chang, the old village committee leader, except when talking about the clans in the village and how the Xue family clan still had a lot of influence. One interview respondent said that his own family was not friendly with the Xue family, but they were friends of friends, and it is impossible to avoid each other in such a small town, so people act cordial (Interview 1). The only exception to this tendency to use “corrupt official” and not mention any names was during a documentary screening in my host family’s house. During the film, people would point out ‘corrupt officials’ onscreen and

¹⁷³ Zeng (2013, p.25, note 10)

repeat their names. However, this seemed to be for my benefit, so I could become familiar with the names of the people involved.

This abstract way of talking about local officials and village committee members, could have made the protesters claims sound more appealing to the higher level government. The use of the word ‘corrupt official’ might serve to highlight the endemic problem of corruption in local government, and could be understood as a deliberate effort to strengthen the case for central government intervention. Using words like ‘corruption’ (腐败 *fubai*) and ‘corrupt official’ is arguably a much more powerful rhetorical strategy than name-blaming specific local village leaders. Anti-corruption campaigns are high on the CCP leadership’s agenda, and several villagers I talked to referred to this policy, and it is quite possible that they thought of this as an important part of the Party’s ideology (Interviews 1, 2, 6). Using the term ‘corruption’ could be a way of framing local officials as against the ideology of the Party. In this sense, villagers use the term corrupt official as a hard-hitting accusation directed at lower-level authority figures (without giving their names), an accusation they think higher-level authorities should respond to.

The reason why people were dissatisfied with the new village committee was because they still had not solved the land dispute and the villagers were anxiously waiting for compensation or return of their farmland. When I asked how people felt about the current situation in Wukan, typical responses were, for example, “the situation is not encouraging” (情况不妙 *qingkuang bu miao*) and “the outcome is not too satisfactory” (结果不太满意 *jieguo bu tai manyi*). From the interviews, I got the impression that Lin Zuluan, the new village committee leader, was perceived as a good man. However, some respondents saw him as overwhelmed with the tasks of his office while others saw him as busy having meetings with the local government. There was no indication that respondents thought Lin was corrupt or untrustworthy, but some expressed concern about how the local government cadres would influence him (Interview 1, 2, 4). These statements implied that local government cadres would have a negative influence on him. Several people mentioned that Lin Zuluan had underestimated the responsibility and difficulty of solving the land dispute (Interview 4, 6).

There were several reasons why Wukan residents were unhappy with the local government at the city and township level. The most common attitude was that the local government in Lufeng did not handle the situation well, did not give them satisfactory information and had given untruthful accounts of the Wukan Incident on their official websites and in the media. One respondent said “They [the Lufeng government officials]

distort the facts in the news” (他们在新闻上扭曲事实 *tamen zai xinwen shang niuqu shishi*) (Interview 6). The villagers in Wukan expressed disappointment with the way their land right claims were treated by the local government after the elections. The protests led to the removal of corrupt village committee members, but the villagers were disappointed because the land use dispute was not solved and they had yet to receive compensation. When I asked people how they felt about the outcome or results of the Wukan Incident, most people made comments such as “there are no results” (没什么结果 *mei shenme jieguo*). When I talked to my respondents in Wukan I often got the impression that they were disappointed and at a loss about what to do about the situation.

4.2 Perception of central government: Abstract savior

In *Moving towards cooperative governance*, Zhao claims that the way the Lufeng and Shanwei local governments handled the Wukan Incident led the Wukan villagers to only have hope for the central and provincial government.¹⁷⁴ A villager being interviewed in the documentary *Three Days in Wukan* echoes this sentiment: “We entreat the central government to come and help us, help us resolve [the issue].”¹⁷⁵ It is interesting to note that these words were spoken in December 2011, during the height of tension between Wukan villagers and the government.

My general impression was that Wukan villagers have a generally positive view of the central government. Several respondents in Wukan said they had faith in the central government (中央政府 *zhongyang zhengfu*) and faith in central leadership (Interview 1, 3, 6, 8). These respondents all mentioned central Party leadership figures by name and tied them to what they perceived as beneficial, important policies, such as school, healthcare and overall development of the countryside. For example, Interviewee 6 said Wen Jiabao had been good to the peasants (农民 *nongmin*), especially in terms of education, healthcare and taxes. Conversely, Interviewee 3 said he had a bad impression of Wen Jiabao after it was revealed Wen’s family had become very rich while he was in power. In these interviews, respondents did not mention the same leadership figures or the same policies or policy sectors, though several respondents said President Xi’s and the current central government’s efforts to crack down on corruption was important (Interviews 1, 2, 6).

¹⁷⁴ Zhao (2013, p.54)

¹⁷⁵ Ai (2012a).“我们就请求中央政府来救救我们，帮我们解决 [问题].”

One respondent said he had a good impression of President Xi Jinping, because his way of dealing with things was like a true leader, and because he wanted to give hope to Chinese peasants (Interview 2). He further stated that it was not possible for one person to overturn every policy, but that it was possible for state leaders to bring about prosperity for peasants (Interview 2). Most of my interviews were conducted in people's homes, so my respondents often spoke quite openly about different Chinese leaders. In one conversation with Interviewee 1 and 2, they talked about how difficult life had been for peasants during the Mao Zedong era. All these interview responses show that the Wukan residents had an interest in and understanding of higher-level government and had certain hopes and expectations that the central government would take care of the peasants.

However, my respondents never spoke of central government intervention in the Wukan case, never tied central leadership figures to hopes of solving the Wukan Incident and did not seem to perceive the central leadership as part of the issue. Though Wukan protesters referred to specific laws and appealed to the ideology of the central leadership during the Wukan Incident, there is little evidence to suggest that villagers in Wukan saw the central government as anything other than an abstract political force. I did not get the impression that Wukan villagers had any intention of bringing the issue further up the system. My respondents were dissatisfied with the government response and seemed like they wanted the central government to come to Wukan and handle the issue. However, there is little evidence that their use of the term 'central government' means any specific person or government office. In other words, Wukan residents seemed to distinguish between specific top-level officials, such as President Xi, yet had a more abstract notion of the central government level. Interviewee 1 and 2 could relate to different leaders and told me how they felt about President Xi's leadership style. However, none of my respondents connected top political leaders with the Wukan Incident. In terms of the Wukan Incident, my respondents only vaguely referred to the central government as a level of government that could help solve the land issue dispute.

4.3 Perception change over time

Villagers' perception of the local and central government may be subject to change over time. Perception change is only to be expected, and is often a result of both the outcome of the petition and the experience of protesting. In *Trust in the Chinese Countryside*, Li poses that petitioning the government is a process in which the protesters gain knowledge about politics

and perhaps reconsider the trustworthiness of the central government.¹⁷⁶ His research shows that there is a substantial gap between peasants' trust in the center's commitment and trust in its competence, and that both are weakened after petitioning.¹⁷⁷

Given that Wukan residents had yet to receive compensation, it would be reasonable to expect a decline of confidence in the center's ability to enforce policy. Based on my findings, it is difficult to determine if people had a different attitude towards the central government than before. During the documentary screening, I asked whether or not they had faith in the central government, even if they didn't have faith in the local government at the time of the Wukan Incident. One respondent just laughed and said "We don't have faith in the local government now either." It did not seem like he was avoiding the question, he was simply more concerned about the local government. His attitude shows he had not changed his mind about the local government. Interviewee 4 stopped by the village committee compound one day while I was conducting interviews there, and I asked her if she used to go to the village compound often, before the Wukan Incident. She replied along the lines of "Everything is still the same around here." She did not give me the impression that she had changed her opinion about the village committee in any way.

All of my respondents in Wukan expressed concern about the future, especially with regards to development of the countryside and what it would mean for their way of life. One respondent was concerned about the development of Wukan and how the economic development in the region was focused on expanding cities instead of developing the countryside (Interview 6). Several of my informants were concerned about how the land dispute would affect housing prices and opportunities for the coming generations (Interview 1, 2, 4, 6). An article by Zhao Yang supports this finding; "A lot of Wukan people emphasize; the land problem concerns the next generation."¹⁷⁸ Wei, my self-appointed guide in Wukan, often told me about issues that he thought a lot of people in Wukan cared about, such as housing prices. It is therefore difficult to determine to what extent he was giving his own personal opinion on these matters. On the one hand, I thought he treated me like he would have treated a journalist, it seemed as if he tried to guess what topics I was interested in hearing about. On the other hand, he often mentioned that he preferred living in the village over living in the city, and he struck me as genuinely concerned that Wukan might become

¹⁷⁶ Li (2008, p.213)

¹⁷⁷ Li (2008, p.219)

¹⁷⁸ Zhao (2013, p.54) "很多乌坎人强调， 土地问题事关子孙后代。"

completely urbanized. It was much easier to see why the parents in my host family cared about housing prices, since they were clearly concerned about their own children's future.

O'Brien and Li argue that the act of protesting can affect activists; in some cases experience with protests will lead to feelings of empowerment, in other cases disillusionment.¹⁷⁹ I would argue that at least one of my respondents fall in the latter category. My interview subject Wei, whom I interviewed over the course of two days, showed a remarkable change in attitude from one day to the next. He had just arrived back in the village for a few days off work when I met him. Wei told me he had not been back in the village for a long time, and he had been looking forward to meeting his friends again. Wei had a close friendship with the youngest member of the newly elected village committee and an old classmate of his is married to a village committee member. Wei's perceptions of the status quo in the village seemed to change drastically after he spoke with them; the first day he seemed enthusiastic and excited when he talked about the Wukan protests, and the second day, after he had spent the evening with all his old friends and classmates, he told me he was very disheartened to hear about how things had been going in the village while he had been gone. After I noticed this change in Wei's attitude towards the situation in Wukan, I got the impression that he was getting closer to a point where his faith in the central government would falter as well. When I asked if his opinions about the central government had changed, Wei said he had really thought the central government would be able to solve the problem, but that he now felt disappointed.

4.4 Conclusion

Put simply, my findings indicate that Wukan villagers clearly differentiated between local and central authorities. The interview responses suggest people had faith in higher levels, and expressed a certain level of expectation that the central leadership would take care of the peasantry. At the same time, the Wukan villagers I talked to had a very negative view of local authorities. By using abstract terms such as 'corrupt official', villagers are arguably constructing the problem in Wukan in a way that allows the central government to put the blame on a few people, remove them from power and retain party legitimacy.

The interviews I conducted in Wukan do not conclusively show that petitioning the government has weakened the villagers' trust in the central government. However, there was one interview subject who seemed to be in a process of losing faith in the central

¹⁷⁹ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.102-108)

government's *willingness* to help them get their land back. It is difficult to determine if this means he had a loss of faith in their *ability* to help.

A major limitation of my research is that the Wukan Incident is in many ways an ongoing dispute. Since conducting fieldwork in Wukan, the old village leadership who were ousted from power in 2011 were recently reappointed to political positions. Not only are they back in politics, but they have also been given positions at a higher political level than before the protests. This has undoubtedly had an impact on how people perceive the local government (and perhaps even the central government), and would be an interesting topic for further study.

5 Analysis Part II: Perceptions of the news media and social media in Wukan village

The role of the media in the Wukan Incident and how Wukan residents perceive journalists, social media and other means of communicating their cause is important to consider in terms of protesters' reliance on allies, another important feature of rightful resistance. My findings suggest that Wukan villagers had a very friendly attitude towards Hong Kong media and other foreign media outlets, and a more hostile attitude towards domestic media. The Wukan villagers' attitudes were largely based on how these media outlets portrayed the Wukan Incident (and perhaps particularly the events on 21 September) in the news. According to my research, Wukan villagers considered domestic media reports "untruthful", and thought these reports seriously undermined their resistance efforts. To some extent, the foreign media also misrepresented the situation in Wukan, by framing Wukan villagers' claims as part of a grass-roots democracy movement, instead of focusing on the land dispute. Despite this, my research findings show that most villagers in Wukan had a very positive attitude towards foreign journalists and perceive the media in general as an important means of spreading information. Furthermore, I will argue that social media and other mediums such as video documentaries play an important new role in rural protests.

5.1 Perception of the media in general

Generally speaking, media exposure in the news and on the Internet may help attract the attention of the central government and enhance the legitimacy of the resisters' claims. As Cai states; "(...) the media have become perhaps the most important third party in popular resistance in China today. They not only help individual citizens seek justice but also contribute to policy adjustment by covering a group's grievances and thereby enhancing the salience of its issues."¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, media exposure has been seen to have a positive effect on political participation in rural China, because people are more inclined to participate in resistance knowing that the media has reported on the issue.¹⁸¹

There is evidence to suggest that Wukan villagers hoped the media would help them raise awareness about the Wukan land dispute, put pressure on the government to respond to

¹⁸⁰ Cai (2010, p.157)

¹⁸¹ Li (2008, p.214)

the issue and help document events that would involve confrontations between villagers and different levels of government. In the words of Wukan protest leader Lin Zuluan; “It is best to have the media to accompany us [on our march], because they can bear witness.”¹⁸² The Wukan villagers were very concerned with how the Wukan Incident was portrayed in the media, both foreign and domestic, and they thought this would influence government response and subsequently the outcome of the protest.

All the interview subjects in Wukan were keen to tell me how many journalists had come to Wukan, and would list several countries of origin. This eagerness to tell me about foreign journalists may be attributed to the fact that I was a foreigner, and that they thought it would interest me to hear about other foreigners. However, several respondents made comments that suggest they consider the great number of foreign journalists an indicator of the gravity of the situation and the legitimacy of their claims. For example, my guide in Wukan, Wei, said; “After the September 21 incident in our village, the media came on their own [accord]” (Interview 1).¹⁸³ In other words, if the Wukan Incident attracted so many journalists from all over the world, then it must be a universally recognized problem, a reasonable protest. Journalists, and even students such as myself, were seen as people who could help them spread the word about their case, and put pressure on the government to resolve the land dispute.¹⁸⁴

In much the same way as it is difficult to predict the government’s reaction to rural unrest, it is not always easy to know if and how the Chinese state media will portray the protesters’ cause. Chinese media outlets are subject to restrictions on what they can publish. The media in China face serious censorship in reporting rural unrest.¹⁸⁵ One of my informants claimed that when it comes to the topic of safeguarding rights, the major media outlets in China will not report it (Interview 12). However, the Chinese central leadership allows for some investigative journalism, especially reports that target the wrongdoings of local officials and rich individuals.¹⁸⁶ It is a paradox that the Party “promotes the practices of investigative journalism (...), but at the same time cracks down on journalists’ and news organizations’ over-brave investigative reporting as a result of its worries over the impacts of investigative reports on social stability.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Ai (2012b). “最好是有媒体陪同较好, 因为可以做一个见证。”

¹⁸³“我们村 9-21 事件发生之后, 媒体自己来了。”

¹⁸⁴ Rui (Mar 23, 2012)

¹⁸⁵ Cai (2010, p.112)

¹⁸⁶ Tong (2011, p.28)

¹⁸⁷ Tong (2011, p.28)

It is reasonable to assume that the media's involvement in the Wukan Incident had major consequences for how the government responded to the situation. The international media's high degree of interest may even have pushed the government to take a soft approach because the whole world was watching. The CCP has been known to "switch between soft and tough tactics in accordance with the requirement of different circumstances."¹⁸⁸

In terms of the Wukan Incident, it is important to distinguish between foreign and mainland media coverage of the events. The media coverage of the Wukan Incident was framed in very different ways depending on whether or not it was subject to state censorship. Zeng describes the news discourse surrounding the Wukan Incident as a news war between the domestic and foreign media.¹⁸⁹ In the following sections, we will see that Wukan residents adopted very different attitudes towards domestic and foreign journalists as a result of this.

5.2 Perception of domestic media: Untrustworthy

My research shows that Wukan residents had a negative perception of domestic media. Considering the way domestic media reports portray the clash between protesters and police on September 21, 2011, the negative impression of domestic media does not seem unwarranted. According to Zeng, the Lufeng Propaganda Department published a press release on the evening of September 22, on the Shanwei Municipal Government website. The press release was entitled "A Case Involving a Small Number of Villagers from Wukan Village, Donghai Town, Lufeng City Gathering to Cause Trouble and Intentionally Destroy Property". Later, mainland media, including the *Nanfang Daily* (南方日报 *Nanfang ribao*), wrote their first reports about the Wukan Incident on the basis of this information, without sending reporters to Wukan to investigate the situation.¹⁹⁰ Zeng argues that this created a sense of mistrust of the mainland media in Wukan, and caused the villagers to seek out the foreign media.¹⁹¹ The negative impression of domestic media was exacerbated when *Nanfang Daily* yet again attributed the November 21 demonstration to "a small number of people", in an article based on information from the Lufeng City Propaganda Department.¹⁹²

My interviews reflect this sense of mistrust of domestic media. The interviewees considered the reports from foreign journalists to be true, while mainland media outlets did

¹⁸⁸ Lam (Jan 11, 2012)

¹⁸⁹ Zeng (2013, p.52)

¹⁹⁰ Zeng (2013, p.46)

¹⁹¹ Zeng (2013, p.46)

¹⁹² Zeng (2013, p.46)

not try to reflect villagers side of the story, and were therefore considered to be incorrect reports. When I asked Wukan residents about how they felt about mainland media outlets, most replied that there were not as many reporters from the mainland as from Hong Kong and abroad, and that mainland Chinese papers often misrepresented the situation (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8). Several respondents mentioned *Nanfang Daily* as particularly untrustworthy, because the reporters from *Nanfang Daily* did not report the truth (Interviews 1, 3, 4). *Nanfang Daily* was also mentioned by a source who had conducted academic research in Wukan, and he said that this publication had tried to discredit the protesters and had called the protest “illegal” (非法的 *feifa de*) (Interview 12).

One might argue that this mistrust of domestic media was too uncompromising. After all, the provincial level authorities intervened only after the Chinese domestic media started covering the Wukan protests and the death of protester Xue Jinbo. Zhao even attributes Wukan’s success in arranging village elections to the *domestic* media’s close attention to the case.¹⁹³ The domestic media is obviously seen as a powerful force in cases of rural unrest, but the Wukan villagers’ first impressions of domestic media coverage convinced them that the local news media was not to be trusted. As a result, Wukan protesters sought out other allies, such as Hong Kong journalists and other international journalists.

5.3 Perception of foreign media: Friends and allies

The villagers trusted the media, both foreign and domestic, to get out the information and spread the word about the illegal land grab. However, in my conversations with Chinese academia, there was a lot of focus on how the Wukan villagers’ goals and objectives were not the same as what was portrayed by foreign media. Zheng Yanxiong, Party Secretary of Shanwei municipality, claimed that foreign media was “stirring the issue up into a tumult, endlessly blowing it up, so that it is already far removed from what the villagers had wanted.”¹⁹⁴ There is some truth to his statement. In many ways, there seems to have emerged two narratives from the Wukan Incident, one as seen through the eyes of foreign journalists, and one from the perspective of the Wukan villagers. As mentioned previously, foreign media coverage of the incident has been largely focused on issues such as democracy and grassroots political movement. For example, it was common for the foreign media to attach labels “rife

¹⁹³ Zhao (2013, p.53)

¹⁹⁴ Guangdong News (9 December 2011). “(...)把一个村的问题炒得沸沸扬扬, 无限放大, 已经跟村民的意愿相去很远.”

with political connotations”¹⁹⁵, such as *democracy*, *rule of law*, *human rights* and *self-governance*.¹⁹⁶ The Wukan residents I talked to used quite different terms to describe their key concerns. They used terms such as “corrupt official”, “land grab” (抢地 *qiangdi*) and “share profit” (分红 *fenhong*) to describe what they considered the core of the Wukan Incident. My research shows that the primary objective of the Wukan villagers was to get the land back, or receive compensation for expropriated land (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11). My interviews with academic researchers support this argument. They were all intrigued by the gap between protester demands for land and the media’s focus on political issues (Interview 12, 13, 14). Almost all responses, among Wukan residents and academia alike, were variations of the phrase “The topic of this case concerns land” (这个案例的议题有关土地的 *Zhe ge anli de yiti you guan tudi de*). Protest leader and village committee leader Lin Zuluan thinks Wukan people all along have only had a simple appeal for their land compensation, and do not have any political schemes.¹⁹⁷

This is further demonstrated by the debate about the “Wukan model”. As mentioned in chapter 2, the Wukan Incident sparked a debate about whether or not the government had adopted a new way of dealing with land grab protesters, and there were some that argued that the government intervention and concessions were somehow different from other cases of rural unrest. My research shows that villagers and outsiders alike do not think there is such a thing as a “Wukan model”. According to *Xinmin Weekly*, Lin Zuluan thinks “the outside world has attached too much political significance to Wukan, and by no means believes there exists a so-called Wukan-model”.¹⁹⁸ When I asked Wukan residents about the Wukan model, several respondents did not like the political labels used in the media and outright rejected the term “model” (Interview 1, 3, 6). During interviews with Chinese scholars, they all said there was no such thing as an Wukan model (Interview 12, 13, 14). One respondent replied by asking a rhetorical question; “what is it that makes it a model?” (Interview 13).

When asked if the situation in Wukan was similar to other events that had happened in other places in China, some respondents said, “No, every place is different” (Interview 1, 3, 4). This is interesting because it shows that Wukan residents think their case is unique. This corresponds to the answers about whether or not they think there is an Wukan model. Because

¹⁹⁵ Zeng (2013, p.66)

¹⁹⁶ Fung (Sept 23, 2012), Hui (Jan 16, 2013), Jacob and Anderlini (Jan 30, 2012), Lubman (Jan 07, 2012), Ran (Dec 16, 2011), The Economist (Oct 20, 2012)

¹⁹⁷ *Xinmin Weekly* (Mar 26, 2012) “他认为乌坎人从来都只是很单纯的土地利益诉求, 没有任何政治企图.”

¹⁹⁸ *Xinmin Weekly* (Mar 26, 2012) “乌坎被外界附加了太多的政治色彩, 林祖銓并不认同存在所谓的‘乌坎模式’.”

Wukan has its own particular land problem, and the villagers understanding and handling of the land problem is unique, there cannot be an Wukan model to use in other situations and other locations.

The difference between the foreign media reports from Wukan and the villagers' own portrayal of events is also evident from how my interview respondents describe the outcome of the protest. All the respondents considered the Wukan protests unsuccessful. Conversely, several foreign media reports claimed that the protesters demands were met and that the Wukan Incident had a peaceful ending. For example, the foreign media lauded the protesters for succeeding in getting new elections, but the election was not the Wukan residents' primary objective. The Wukan villagers I talked to saw the elections as a means to getting their land back, not an end in itself. The desire to get rid of the corrupt officials in the village committee was seen as linked to this primary objective. My respondents indicated that the effort to get rid of and punish those responsible, for example by holding elections, was a means to solving the land problem. This clearly demonstrates that the foreign media interpreted and portrayed the aims of the protest quite differently from how Wukan villagers did. If the objective was simply to hold elections and get rid of the old guard, the protest would be considered successful, and Wukan villagers would be satisfied with the end result.

Many of my respondents in Wukan agreed that foreign media reports exaggerated the political nature of the Wukan case, but they did not elaborate how. In one conversation with two Wukan villagers, they said the foreign journalists had asked a lot of questions about democracy and the village committee elections (Interview 1, 2). As mentioned in the previous chapter, several of my respondents expressed concerns about the new village committee leadership. Furthermore, respondents often mentioned government concessions such as the return of (small) land areas and settlement payments to the Xue family, but never spoke of the elections as a concession gained from the government. One reason for this might be that it is easier to value and appreciate physical gains such as land and monetary compensation, rather than abstract political gains such as democratic village elections.

Furthermore, it seems many foreign journalists focused on conducting interviews with the same type of people; protest leaders such as Zhuang Liehong, Lin Zuluan and others. One of my female respondents said she had never been interviewed by journalists, even though she and her family had hosted several foreign journalists for the greater part of a year, many of them from Hong Kong (Interview 4). When I met Wei, my guide and first interview subject, he asked me whether or not I was planning on interviewing Hong Ruichao, a village committee member.

Several other statements from interviews gave further clues to how journalists might have influenced the Wukan villagers. Without my prompting or even mentioning democracy, several villagers asked about my views on democracy. They seemed curious and just interested in making conversation. The respondents clearly stated that they were not sure that democracy was right for China, and it seemed like the idea of democracy was foreign and unimportant for the future of Wukan (Interview 1, 2). There seemed to be a trend among my interview respondents in terms of interest in democracy, but not their own democratic experience with village elections. All this gave me the impression that the interviewees in Wukan were not concerned about democracy in Wukan; but democracy has become a talking point, a topic of conversation. Other responses support this finding. For example, Interviewee 4 claimed she had never really understood the point of having an election in Wukan in the first place. She said she understood the electoral process and knew she was free to vote as she pleased, but she did not see how it mattered in a small village where people just came and told you to vote for them. Her answer is not all that surprising, given that the first and only time she participated in village elections was during a dramatic protest. One might argue that a lot stood to gain from electing the protest leader Lin Zuluan as village committee leader, because it would show village unity, and Interviewee 4 probably did not think she had many other options.

In other words, foreign journalists may have had an influence on the villagers in terms of rights consciousness and resistance efforts because they kept asking questions that pertained to democracy and political rights. O'Brien and Li argue that even though popular input in policymaking is limited, protests may still have an impact on policy implementation and an *evolving political culture*.¹⁹⁹ Even though Chinese protesters may not have a direct influence on policymaking, they may put a spotlight on how a policy is being implemented and their experience of political participation will have an effect on their behavior and rights consciousness. Some argue there is an emerging trend of rights consciousness in the Chinese countryside.²⁰⁰ Liang cites Wukan as a specific example of how there has been an increase in knowledge of law and rights consciousness among Chinese people.²⁰¹ According to an article from *China Real Time*, some Wukan protesters were acting in a rights-conscious manner. The

¹⁹⁹ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.96)

²⁰⁰ O'Brien (2006b, p.394), Pei (2010, p.31)

²⁰¹ Liang (2012, p.94)

same article quotes one Wukan resident as saying; “we must use the weapons provided by the legal system to fight corruption to the end.”²⁰²

All this shows a clear difference between how some of the foreign media outlets described the Wukan protester’s interest in democracy, and how my respondents felt about democracy. Considering how the foreign media focused so much on issues such as democracy and possibly made their case unnecessarily politically sensitive, it may seem odd that they had such a high regard for foreign journalists. In reference to journalists from Hong Kong who visited Wukan on a regular basis, they described them as friends (朋友 *pengyou*), and “like (same as) you” (像你 *xiang ni*) (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 8, 9). When I asked Wei how he felt about all these foreign journalists visiting the village all the time, he said that without them, I would have come to a completely different village, one with high-rise buildings and large companies and factories. Wei clearly thought that the Wukan Incident would have turned out very differently had it not been for extensive international media coverage.

However, there was little indication that my interview subjects in Wukan had read any of the news articles written by foreign journalists. Their spoken English was so poor that I was not able to communicate with them in English, so there is little reason to believe they read foreign-language articles about Wukan. Not surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned publication in interviews was the Hong Kong-based newspaper the *Apple Daily* (苹果 *pingguo ribao*), which is a Chinese-language publication. Therefore, the positive attitude towards foreign journalists could also be attributed to the fact that the interview respondents did not know that the foreign media articles about Wukan were so politically charged.

Another reason why the Wukan villagers called journalists “friends” could be the emphasis on social connections in Chinese culture. Networking is very important in China and it is not unusual for people to call new acquaintances friends, especially if it is perceived as a useful social connection or there are benefits in maintaining the relationship. In this sense, it might just be a sense of pragmatism that motivates the Wukan villagers to have a friendly relationship with journalists. Therefore, it is difficult to say if this attitude is simply a matter of common social behavior in China.

During my stay in Wukan, I found evidence that the villagers had a strong perception of the foreign media as important allies and tools, and that they deliberately tried to align themselves with the media. Several informants took pride in keeping their homes open to journalists; inviting journalists to stay in their homes, and wash and cook for them (Interview

²⁰² Lubman (Jan 07, 2012)

4, 8). In an interview with *Radio France Internationale*, Zhang Jianxing states that the younger people discussed the land grab problem in Wukan in *QQ* online discussion forums, and that they talked about using money to invite journalists to Wukan in the months prior to the September 21 protests.²⁰³ Furthermore, the villagers attached great importance to how their actions were portrayed. Zeng argues that young Wukan villagers were disseminating information and “fighting news battles when they felt a report to be untrue”.²⁰⁴ All this shows how keen the Wukan residents were to find allies in the media. Even though the foreign media representation was at odds with the protesters understanding of the situation, they still tried to mobilize public support and considered foreign media as an important ally in this regard.

5.4 Perception of social media: A tool to communicate

The Wukan villagers’ perception of social media is important, because it is a new development in terms of how rural Chinese use different tools and rely on different social forces to put pressure on the government. O’Brien and Li show how mobile phones were used as a tool to coordinate and plan collective action.²⁰⁵ Similarly, the Internet allows people to open up cases of injustice to a public discussion.²⁰⁶ One might even argue that it is easier to use politically sensitive words online rather than in interviews with the media. Internet users often think of the Internet as a freer and more open space for public participation.²⁰⁷ Social media sites created a platform that made it easier to document events and helped make the Wukan Incident a high-profile case, which in turn allowed more people to participate. As Xiao Qiang states; “The Chinese Internet has become a substantial communications platform across which to aggregate information and coordinate collective action.”²⁰⁸ My respondents in Wukan perceived social media as a means to communicate their grievances to a greater audience and justify their claims. I argue that while Wukan villagers saw the foreign media as potential ally and friend, they saw social media as a tool to frame their claims.

The Wukan villagers I interviewed below the age of 30 perceived social media as a new tool to spread information. Even though social media sites were mostly used by the younger generation, older villagers also mentioned that this was an important method of

²⁰³ Rui (Mar 23, 2012)

²⁰⁴ Zeng (2013, p.52)

²⁰⁵ O’Brien and Li (2007, p.84)

²⁰⁶ Yang (2006, p.309), Qiang (2011, p.203)

²⁰⁷ Yang (2006, p.310)

²⁰⁸ Qiang (2011, p.222)

getting the word out (Interview 2, 6). According to one respondent, there was some concern among Wukan netizens about possible government surveillance and censorship, but none of my respondents had ever been concerned about this personally (Interview 1).

In conversation with Interviewee 3, I found out more about online activism during the Wukan Incident. Interviewee 3 was a 19-year old from Wukan who usually worked in another city, and he said that even though he did not participate in the Wukan Incident, he followed the situation online. He wanted to pay close attention because his family was there and was involved, and he spread information himself using Weibo (see picture 4).



Picture 4: Interviewee 3 showed me how he used social media sites to search for Wukan, stay updated and share information with others. This picture shows search results for keywords ‘pay attention to the Wukan Incident’ (关注乌坎事件 *guanzhu Wukan shijian*). Picture taken by author, 06.11.13

I also found evidence on Weibo of other Wukan residents actively using social media sites to spread the word of Wukan's political affairs online. One young Wukan blogger and netizen (or 网民 *wangmin*), Zhang Jianxing, dedicated himself to filming, blogging and contacting journalists during the Wukan Incident. Zhang and other Wukan online activists started putting WK (an abbreviation of Wukan) in their usernames, an example of how Zhang used social media to mobilize wider support for the Wukan protesters. In a comment posted to Weibo on January 1, 2012, at 22:28, Zhang writes; "All blog readers, my Weibo username MR 张建兴 will change to WK 张建兴, Zhuang Liehong has already started using Weibo, username @WK 庄烈宏, hope everyone will give us a lot of support!"²⁰⁹ This arguably put more focus on the Wukan protester's cause than on him as an individual person, and could be seen as a strategy to mobilize support from the public.

Zhang was active on both Chinese and foreign social media sites; Twitter, Weibo, QQ and Facebook. Zhang used several social media outlets because the Chinese government monitors and censors the media, including the Internet.²¹⁰ Under the username WKZhangJianxing (WK 张建兴) in one post on Weibo on September 2, 2012, Zhang wrote that he was moved to tears by the documentary *Wukan* by director Chen Xilin: "I saw the iSun-produced feature documentary "Wukan" on Youtube, although the trailer is only 4 minutes long, it still defeated my hard heart. Tears, who would have known? Is there anything more painful to think of than this?"²¹¹ This post was later deleted from Weibo.

Chinese censorship severely limits social media as a communication tool in mass incidents. Qiang claims that the most important goal of state censorship is "to prevent large-scale distribution of information that may lead to collective action (...)." ²¹² Though his post about the documentary might seem innocuous, Zhang Jianxing was a member of The Wukan Hot-blooded Youth Group, and participated in the online discussion group on QQ, where the initiative to petition the government about the illegal land sale had first surfaced. The state censors had many reasons to fear that Zhang's posts might lead to further unrest. Zhang complained about censorship in several posts on Weibo after the government blocked and deleted his posts. Zhang shows how many different ways he tried to stay online and continue communicating using social media. On December 11, 2012 Zhang Jianxing posted on Weibo:

²⁰⁹ See appendix B, part III Primary sources from social media, note 2

²¹⁰ Shirk (2011, p.2)

²¹¹ See appendix B, part III Primary sources from social media, note 3

²¹² Qiang (2011, p.209)

Very excited, qq blog has finally been reopened! On December 11th, I just wanted to thank Tencent for not blocking my blogspace, when I noticed the blogspace was closed; I continued sending via email, [then found out that] mail box had disappeared; I sent directly from the qq window, [then found] qq got blocked; I could still use the microblog, [but] everything got deleted after one time. All 4 q accounts have been blocked in various ways. Finally, they have unblocked it, but I discovered that the last entry that had been forwarded more than 800 times, has only been forwarded to some 200... Do not know how many others have had their posts deleted.²¹³

This message not only shows how determined Zhang was to stay active online, but it also reveals how he could be considered an online activist. He was clearly proactive and tried to engage more people in the Wukan Incident by forwarding messages to a large number of people. He also posted messages that concerned the Wukan Incident and local politics in Wukan village long after the village elections were held in March 2012. This shows he used social media as a tool to spread information, and that this protest is still an on-going affair.

It is difficult to know to what extent the use of social media as a resistance tool made a difference. Zeng claims the Wukan Hot-blooded Youth Group took a “step out of the virtual world of the [I]nternet” when they decided to petition the Guangdong provincial government on June 21, 2009.²¹⁴ This phenomenon of collective action originating online and then transferred to the social world is what Yang Guobin calls ‘Internet-originated interactions’.²¹⁵ However, several respondents also said that even though Patriot No.1 and the younger generation may have brought about the September 21 incident by discussing the land problem in online discussion forums, the demonstrations would have happened anyway (Interview 1, 2, 3, 11). Interviewee 1 said he thought it would have happened either way, but that it wouldn’t have been as big, or as known around the world. One respondent said that people were so upset after the death of Xue Jinbo that they wanted to rise up against injustice (Interview 11), meaning that their decision to continue protesting had little to do with the development of the issue online.

In the post-September 21 protests and demonstrations, social media was used to spread information to other Wukan residents, but information spread by other means as well. One of my interviewees said she used an old gong to summon people to the village square

²¹³ See appendix B, part III Primary sources from social media, note 4

²¹⁴ Zeng (2013, p.33)

²¹⁵ Yang (2006, p.310)

when there was important news from the Lufeng municipal government or protest leaders. I also observed that information spread by word of mouth quite quickly. For example, I met two journalists from Hong Kong during my stay in Wukan, who had come to visit and interview Xue Jinbo's daughter. Even though the journalists only spent a couple of hours in the village, my host family had already heard of their visit when I returned to the house.

My host family did not have their own computer, and said they did not use social media sites. However, they said there was a type of internet café (网吧 *wangba*) in the village where people could go online, and most newer cellphone models have internet access. There are major regional variations in possession of luxury goods such as computers in China.²¹⁶

There was a clear tendency among respondents who had experience living or working in cities to emphasize the importance of social media. This was not just a generational divide, it was quite obvious that those who had lived in urban areas were more accustomed to using social media and seemed more knowledgeable about the widespread use and reach of social media. Qiang argues that there is a rising level of public information and awareness in Chinese society and that it is catalyzing social and political transition.²¹⁷ As we have seen in this section, several Wukan residents perceived social media as a tool, but not a crucial one in terms of bringing about the Wukan Incident. The most common attitude was that social media sites might have helped them gain more attention from the public, the media and the central government.

5.5 Perception of video documentaries: Telling the Wukan story

Observations of how people perceived video documentaries about the Wukan Incident were important to my understanding of how Wukan villagers used different ways of promoting and perpetuating their story. The Wukan residents I interviewed seemed to have a good impression of video documentaries about the Wukan Incident. I was invited to watch two documentaries, one of them produced by a local resident. I watched one of the documentaries with the local family I lived with and some of their friends. There were six local villagers who saw the documentary in addition to myself.

This was a very interesting situation, because it allowed the six villagers, who had participated in the Wukan protests, to reflect back on everything that had happened in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. There was no real discussion of the current situation in Wukan,

²¹⁶ Saich (2011, pps.191-192)

²¹⁷ Qiang (2011, p.222)

but they all watched quite intently, even though they had all seen the documentary many times before. For my benefit, they pointed out local officials on the screen and repeated their names, and usually added something about how they had handled the situation. For example, they all commented on several statements made by Zheng Yanxiong, Party Secretary of Shanwei municipality. Those who watched the documentary with me explained that they all thought his speech was “fake” (假 *jia*) and he had said Wukan villagers had violated the law, which they did not agree with. Zheng Yanxiong’s other public statement was ridiculed: “You [villagers] get yourselves a few reporters to make a scene. The more the media exaggerate, the happier you are. (...) What good does that do you if I am removed? Another party secretary won’t necessarily be any better than I am. If you believe in what the foreign media says, sows will be climbing trees [pigs will fly].”²¹⁸ The mother in my host family laughed at this, and said she thought Zheng was the one exaggerating.

The villagers shared a lot of laughs while they watched the documentary, and commented on their own rural behavior and appearance in front of the cameras. Even so, it seemed as if the people present felt it was a good representation of the situation, and when I asked respondents what they thought about these documentaries, all agreed that they were truthful (真实 *zhenshi*) and good (好看 *haokan*). The family wanted me to have a copy of the documentary we had watched together, which clearly demonstrates their approval of the documentary.

From my own experience, though my findings are based on only a few days in Wukan, the interview responses do not seem at odds with these documentaries from Wukan. This medium is arguably an important feature of rural activism in China, and it is a tool to put more pressure on the government and sustain a political claim, long after the demonstrations and protests are over. Furthermore, it is a way of promoting a narrative of their story which they approve of.

5.6 Conclusion

There is little doubt that the villagers perceived the foreign news media as a useful ally, and domestic media as untrustworthy. Furthermore I found evidence that Wukan villagers perceived social media as a useful tool to communicate with each other and spread information to a wider audience. It is unclear how the overly politicized nature of foreign

²¹⁸ Ai (2012b) 郑雁雄: “找几个记者来吵一吵, 外面说得越难听, 我越高兴。(...) 把我给撤了又有什么好处? 再派一个市委书记来, 也不见得比郑雁雄好多少。境外的媒体信得过, 母猪都会上树。”

media reports affected the protest itself, but the interviews suggest that foreign journalists may have influenced people's perception of democracy, or at least their willingness to talk about it. Furthermore, it might be argued that the huge number of visiting journalists led Wukan residents to believe that they did not need other allies, or other people to champion their claims and help them mobilize support. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that they sought allies from elsewhere. The readiness of the media to report the case and the easy access to social media could have led the villagers to believe that they had secured a powerful ally, and did not need to find political support. O'Brien and Li do not explicitly argue that rightful resisters need to find political allies. However, my findings from Wukan show a heavy reliance on the media to support the protesters' cause and I did not find any similar examples in *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*.

My research shows that the Wukan villagers I talked to were overwhelmingly positive to foreign journalists. However, my observations have shown a huge gap between what the protesters main goals were, and how the foreign media portrayed Wukan protesters' goals and objectives. Despite this contrast in narratives, Wukan villagers hold journalists in high esteem, and still think the media helped their cause.

Furthermore, it seems obvious that the exponential increase of the amount of information available to the public is changing the nature of social protests.²¹⁹ This chapter therefore concludes that the use of social media and use of video documentaries are new variables in rural resistance cases in China, and this variable could be a way to update the theory of rightful resistance.

²¹⁹ Shirk (2011, p.5)

6 Analysis Part III: The Wukan Incident as a Case of Rightful Resistance

In this chapter, I will discuss how the villagers perceive their claims and efforts to solve the land dispute, and revisit the major concepts from rightful resistance as outlined in the chapter about theoretical framework. My research findings show there is evidence of rightful claims-making, unpacking the state and reliance on allies in the Wukan case. Based on this, I will argue that Wukan may be considered an example of rightful resistance. However, my analysis of the Wukan case shows that the theory of rightful resistance does not account for important regional variations in cases of rural unrest in China.

6.1 Evidence of rightful claims: How did Wukan villagers frame their claims?

My fieldwork research shows evidence of rightful claims-making in Wukan. In rightful resistance terms, the protesters operated near the boundary of authorized channels and employed the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful. First of all, the Wukan villagers wrote several petition letters (信访 *xinfang*) and organized several trips to various government offices to seek an audience with higher-ups (上访 *shangfang*).²²⁰ The petitioning system in China allows citizens to petition higher authorities in accordance with the Constitution and the State Council's Letters and Visits Regulation.²²¹ According to Article 41 in the Constitution (1982), Chinese citizens have a right to submit to state organs complaints or charges against, or exposures of, any agency or functionary for violation of the law or dereliction of duty.²²² Petitioning and visiting higher-level government offices to air grievances against local village cadres is a legal form of action, and an institutionalized form of political participation.²²³ Therefore, Chinese villagers often try petitioning government authorities when they have conflicts with local government over land use.²²⁴

However, the regulations are ambiguous, and the government does not show great tolerance for petitions that involve mass mobilization.²²⁵ The State Council's Letters and

²²⁰ Zeng (2013, p.34), Chen (2012)

²²¹ The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982), State Bureau for Letters and Visits (1995, revised 2005)

²²² The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982)

²²³ Li (2008, p.210)

²²⁴ Cai (2010, p.56)

²²⁵ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.31), Li (2008, p.218)

Visits Regulation instructs villagers to send no more than five representatives when lodging complaints and to put forth their claims one level of government at a time.²²⁶ In most cases the central government acknowledges that most of these group appeals and petitions are lawful or reasonable. At the same time, local governments consider petitioning to be a cause of social instability and have a record of arresting leaders of collective action, or so-called “individuals with ulterior motives” (别有用心的**人** *bie you yongxin de ren*).²²⁷ Petitions usually signal to the higher-level government that the lower level government has failed, and local officials obviously want to keep that from happening. In his essay about social stability in China, Yu shows how local governments can limit the citizens’ right to challenge the state by means of “a variety of oppressive measures – even going so far as to detain petitioners unlawfully.”²²⁸

Unsuccessful visits, partly due to this complex legal environment, led Wukan villagers to seek other methods of alerting the government to their plight. When they were unable to meet with government officials in Guangzhou and Shanwei, Wukan villagers started to combine these legal means with other more direct and disruptive tactics, such as trying to halt construction work, clashing with police, demanding a dialogue and organizing peaceful demonstrations. All this shows that the land acquisitions in Wukan and the subsequent petitions and protests have all been part of a long process. The fact that Wukan residents spent several years trying to petition and meet with government officials is important because it means they tried institutionalized, legal methods before taking further action and protesting in greater numbers. In other words, the Wukan villagers tried legal channels and then progressed to more direct, confrontational resistance, near the boundary of authorized channels.

Furthermore, the villagers deliberately used legal language to frame their claims. According to O’Brien and Li, the enactment of laws such as the Organic Law make it easier for villagers to make a case that a violation has occurred.²²⁹ The Wukan case supports this argument. I have argued that the Wukan villagers’ main objective was to get their land back, and punish those responsible. The Wukan protesters decided that the best solution was to prove that the local village cadres were corrupt. The Wukan villagers connected the issue of rigging local elections with the illegal land sale. Cai calls this strategy “issue linkage”, which is a way of making claims more effective, because it puts more pressure on the

²²⁶ State Bureau for Letters and Visits (1995, revised 2005, arts. 16, 18, 34, 35)

²²⁷ O’Brien and Li (2007, pps.31-33)

²²⁸ Yu (2012)

²²⁹ O’Brien and Li (2007, p.30)

government.²³⁰ Cai argues that Chinese peasants are often able to get positive policy responses because they tie their complaints to other “important issues that the government could not afford to ignore”.²³¹ In order to remove local officials from office, the villagers collected evidence to prove that previous elections were fraudulent. Furthermore, Wukan villagers cited the Organic Law to contest election procedures in Wukan and exercised their right to sue the local government by citing the Administrative Litigation Law (1991).²³² This shows that the Wukan villagers made policy- and law-based claims, and this is another important aspect of making rightful claims.

There is also evidence of Wukan villagers making boundary-spanning claims; the Wukan villagers never challenged the party state. The foreign media focus may have inadvertently described the villagers as attempting to challenge the political system and demand democracy, but there is little evidence of this being the villagers’ true intent. To the contrary, Wukan villagers framed their protest in a way that did not challenge the Communist Party regime. As mentioned in chapter 4, Wukan villagers were careful to distinguish between the local and central government. This strategy is part of what O’Brien and Li term boundary-spanning claims. Wukan protesters exploited the gap between high-level policy commitments and ground-level implementation by aligning themselves with the central government while vilifying the local government.

One of the turning points of the Wukan Incident was the meticulously planned demonstration of November 21, 2011. Though planning in and of itself does not make it an act of rightful resistance, there were several indications that the Wukan protesters sought to avoid situations in which they might alienate the central government’s support. First of all, the Wukan protesters deliberately chose an “auspicious date” in order to put pressure on the government and attract media attention; the 84th anniversary of the establishment of the first worker-peasant-soldier democratic regime in Lufeng.²³³ Choosing this particular date could be seen as a nod to the ideology of the Party, which is an important part of rightful resistance. The demonstration was publicly announced in advance, which demonstrates the villagers’ desire to gain the attention of higher-level authorities, yet operate in a near-legal manner. The protesters wanted a peaceful demonstration and this is arguably further evidence of how Wukan protesters deliberately tried to operate within the Chinese political system, within the

²³⁰ Cai (2010, p.86)

²³¹ Cai (2010, p.170)

²³² Lee and Leong (2012)

²³³ Zeng (2013, p.44)

ideology and language of the Party. According to O'Brien and Li, the deliberate use of force or violence should not be considered rightful resistance.²³⁴

This sense of group mentality was evident in other statements too. For example, when I asked respondents if they were afraid at the time of the November 21 demonstration in Wukan, my respondents said that “we [Wukaners]” (我们乌坎人 *women Wukan ren*) were not afraid, because we were all there together (Conversation during showing of documentary, interview 9). Interviewee 4 said that during the demonstration in front of the Lufeng municipal government building, it was the Lufeng mayor who was afraid, because there were so many people gathered to yell at him.

When I posed the question “How much land has your family lost?”, respondents almost always responded by saying how much the village had lost as a whole. It is important to note that most of these disputed land areas were collectively owned, and it is only natural that people would answer accordingly. On November 14, 2011, the villagers submitted a document to the Lufeng City National People's Congress Standing Committee, claiming that 24,300 mu of land areas had been directly or indirectly destroyed by the old village committee.²³⁵ Almost all respondents answered “25,000 mu” (两万五千亩 *liang wan wu qian mu*), but one female respondent answered the question by saying how much land her family had lost; “7 mu” (七亩 *qi mu*). On the one hand, this demonstrates the way people respond to questions in different ways, and could simply mean that most villagers did not hear me say “family” or assumed I meant the collective land. In other words, their tendency to answer the total land area lost could mean that the only legal, rational claim they could put forward was that of the collective. The land issue was a dispute between corrupt local officials and the village as a whole, and the villagers I talked to did not blame the central government. However, I got the impression that they wanted the central government, this abstract force, to come and settle the dispute and get rid of the corrupt cadres. “Wukan people do not have a clear-cut, unified way of looking at things, but in terms of resolutely demanding their land back, they have always had a high degree of consensus.”²³⁶ In other words, the Wukan villagers had a strong sense of belonging to a group, and that they felt justified in making demands, because there were so many people who felt the same way. This is one way the Wukan villagers made their claims sound more rightful.

²³⁴ O'Brien and Li (2007, pps.3-4, 38)

²³⁵ Zeng (2013, p.55) 1 mu (亩 *mu*) = 614,4 m²

²³⁶ Zhao (2013, p.54) “乌坎人还没有一个统一明确的看法，但在坚决要求收回土地这一点上他们一直保持着高度共识。”

6.2 How did the Wukan villagers perceive their claims and actions?

Did the Wukan villagers consider their actions legal, just or simply reasonable? My findings suggest that Wukan residents considered the Wukan Incident and their later demonstrations and protests as legal and justified.

When asked whether or not they thought their actions were legal, several of my respondents said “Yes, our behavior was legal” (对, 我们的行为是合法的 *Dui, women de xingwei shi hefa de*) (Interview 1, 2, 3, 7). Also, when I asked the same question during the screening of the documentary, they all nodded or said yes. According to Zeng, Lin Zuluan was quite satisfied with the organized demonstration of November 21, because he believed that “this was rational, powerful and under-control resistance.”²³⁷ Furthermore, when domestic newspapers underreported the number of participants in the November 21 demonstration, Wukan villagers “felt that it had to it the undertones of a ‘conspiracy’ to discredit the *just* actions of the organizers”.²³⁸

When I asked Wukan villagers *why* they thought their actions were legal, there were different responses, but several respondents referred to the corruption of local leaders and the death of protester Xue Jinbo (1, 4, 6, 7, 8). Two respondents said the local police killed Xue Jinbo, and that the underlying problem was decades of corruption (Interview 6, 7). In other words, their replies indicate that they felt their actions were right because of the wrongfulness of others’ actions. One 86 year old man I interviewed, writing his replies on a piece of paper because he did not speak Mandarin, wrote that he hoped I would make sure “officials justly carry out their tasks and not harm people” (官公正做事不可害人 *guan gongzheng zuo shi bu ke hai ren*) (Interview 8).

There were some respondents who gave indications of how their own actions should be considered rightful. The Wukan residents I talked to had different ways of expressing the way they perceived the justness of their cause. According to one interviewee, their actions were legal (合法 *hefa*) because they petitioned and tried to meet with the government (Interview 6). There were other interview responses that indicated they feel they have little to fear from the government. For example, when asked the question “were you afraid of the government at the time?” or “are you afraid of government reprisals?”, several respondents replied, “what should I be afraid of?” (害怕什么 *haipa shenme*) (Interview 4, 5, 8, 9). Three respondents said that if the government was going to crack down on the protesters they would

²³⁷ Zeng (2013, p.62)

²³⁸ Zeng (2013, p.63) Emphasis added.

have done so already (Interview 1, 3, 5). These findings correspond with statements from interviews with Chinese scholars. In interviews with Chinese academia, respondents said things like “[the Wukan protesters] think their behavior is just”.²³⁹ Another respondent claimed their actions were legal because Wukan villagers are strong in their conviction that the disputed land areas belong to them (Interview 12). All these interview responses led me to conclude that the villagers I talked to were secure in their belief that they have been wronged, and that they have just cause for taking action.

According to Zeng, the Wukan Hot-blooded Youth Group had a QQ chat group in which they posted and shared different documents, including the *International Convention on Human Rights* and the *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*.²⁴⁰ The video documentaries show how a few protesters used terms such as ‘human rights’.²⁴¹ However, the Wukan villagers I interviewed never used term human right.

The villagers who agreed to let me interview them did not consider the Wukan Incident a ‘sensitive’ topic. In fact, my respondents seemed eager to talk, inquisitive about my opinions as an outsider and seemed confident in their cause. It is difficult to say whether or not other villagers were as willing to discuss the Wukan Incident. One respondent apologized on behalf of his father, who did not wish to speak to me because he was fearful that the local government would find out (Interview 2). During my stay in Wukan, I made observed closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras outside the village committee building and the largest square in the village (see Picture 3). The new CCTV camera was one of the visible changes to the village landscape after the Wukan Incident and it was not the change they were hoping for. When I asked how long they had been there, Interviewee 4 said they had been put up after the Wukan Incident. Some villagers expressed uneasiness about the cameras. When I asked how people felt about the CCTV cameras, respondents simply said that they did not like having the cameras there (1, 2, 4, 6). I did not take their simple answers to mean that they were afraid to comment further, they had already told me they did not think the protests were such a sensitive issue.

²³⁹“他们认为他们的这种行为是正义的。”

²⁴⁰ Zeng (2013, p.31)

²⁴¹ Chen (2012), Lee and Leong (2012)



Picture 3: New CCTV camera, on the opposite side of the street from the village committee office building. Picture taken by author, 07.11.13

6.3 Evidence of unpacking the state

In chapter 5, I argued that the Wukan protesters consistently proclaimed their support for the central government, but at the same time demanded accountability of local government officials and local village cadres. My sources show that Wukan villagers considered the land dispute as a problem between the villagers and the local officials. By blaming local officials for policy violation and appealing to higher authorities for help, the Wukan villagers were clearly unpacking the different layers of government to make their case.

In *Wukan, the Whole Story*, Zeng writes that protest leader Lin Zuluan was determined to clarify the Wukan villagers' political standpoint by asking reporters not to describe their actions as a 'revolt', or write that they were 'in opposition to the Communist Party', or that the villagers were attempting to 'break up the country'.²⁴² I found further evidence of this in a post on Weibo. On December 19, 2012, Zhang Jianxing (username @WKZhangJianxing) posted a picture on Weibo, which showed an anonymous note addressed to journalists. The

²⁴² Zeng (2013, p.76)

note in the picture is written in Chinese and English, and requests that reporters write positive reports (正面报道 *zhengmian baodao*) and refrain from using words such as ‘revolt’ (起义 *qiyi*) and ‘rise in revolt’ (起事 *qishi*). The note further states; “We support the Communist Party, we love our country” (我们拥护共产党, 我们爱国家 *women yonghu Gongchandang, women ai guojia*).²⁴³ This is important because it shows how the Wukan protesters clearly and deliberately distinguished between different levels of government, and this supports the argument that Wukan is a case of rightful resistance.

There are several problems with the concept of unpacking the state, however. First of all, the concept of unpacking the state is problematic because it hides the fact that the division between central and local government is part of the reason why these incidents occur. The divide between local and central government can obviously be used as an advantage in rightful resistance, but the concept of unpacking the state does not fully account for how this divide might also be the root of the problem. The incentive for local governments to take land from peasants, such as revenue from land sales, combined with the deliberately vague definitions of ownership defined at the level of central government, creates situations in which local governments might take advantage of villagers, which could then lead to rural unrest. Revenue from land sales is dependent on market prices and the land price development in Guangdong province and the Pear River Delta region is much higher than in other regions in China.²⁴⁴ For example, the value of rural land near urban areas has grown exponentially as China’s cities have expanded.²⁴⁵ This has a major effect on the profit margins and incentives for local governments.

Secondly, the concept of unpacking the state does not account for how protesters in different localities might have different perceptions of the opportunities to petition the central government. O’Brien and Li often cite examples of protesters who took their case to Beijing. There is, however, little evidence that Wukan protesters intended to raise their claims level by level, much less evidence of protesters thinking of going to Beijing to deliver petitions there. The concept of unpacking the state can help explain why Wukan residents would make a careful distinction between local and central government, but it does not explain why the Wukan protesters did not petition the government level by level.

²⁴³ See appendix B, part III Primary sources from social media, note 1

²⁴⁴ The World Bank and China’s State Council Development Research Center (March 25, 2014, p.198)

²⁴⁵ Fang (Feb 26, 2013)

Granted, delivering petitions to Beijing is generally perceived as a last resort.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, differentiating between local and central government does not necessarily mean protesters *have to* petition the highest level of government. However, the theory of rightful resistance does not adequately explain how the perception of the very highest level might influence how villagers protest. To some extent, it seems O'Brien and Li are too concerned with drawing parallels to democratic societies and do not sufficiently consider the implications of China's regional variations. Access to Beijing is not the same across different regions in China, and access to the political center is not the same across different political systems. Wukan is situated less than 10 kilometers from the Lufeng City Municipal Government, while the central government in Beijing is more than 2,100 kilometers away. If we take this into consideration, it is not so surprising that Wukan protesters did not entertain the idea of petitioning in Beijing.

Access to political decision makers in China is not just dependent on geographical distance, but is also dependent on the different mechanisms available to the public to voice or address grievances. Cai notes that even though Chinese citizens are allowed to use lawsuits and petitions to resolve conflicts, these channels are limited in their effectiveness.²⁴⁷ O'Brien and Li draw comparisons to rightful resistance cases in the United States, but the political system in the United States grants much easier access to political decision makers than in China, due to a high degree of accountability of elected government officials and a wider array of institutionalized channels for conflict resolution.

Even though Wukan protesters also considered the state multidimensional, and deliberately differentiated between local and central government, they did not have the same perception of protest opportunities as protesters from other regions or other political systems. I argue that the Wukan protesters might have different ways of perceiving the opportunity to protest, because they are so far from Beijing. For example, in Wukan, where they clearly distinguished between local and central government, there was no mention or discussion about going to Beijing to protest. This shows that even though Wukan protesters did not consider the state monolithic, they did not entertain the idea of going to Beijing to deliver a petition either.

²⁴⁶ Li (2008, p.211)

²⁴⁷ Cai (2010, p.41)

6.4 Evidence of reliance on allies

The theory of rightful resistance emphasizes the importance for protesters to seek advocates who are willing to “investigate their charges and champion their claims”²⁴⁸. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Wukan villagers treated the media in general as an important ally. They invited journalists to stay with them, and journalists who did not report the “truth” were disavowed. Wukan residents actively used social media sites to share information and sought the help of foreign journalists to gain more attention. This suggests that mobilization of public support was important to the Wukan protesters.

This seems to have led to a dependence on the media as ally in the Wukan case. Based on findings from my fieldwork, there is little evidence of Wukan residents trying to gain supporters in the political system. The Wukan Incident demonstrates that geographical distance from Beijing might also lead to an abstraction of the central government in Beijing. The geographical region in which the protest occurs arguably has major implications for how people pursue their rights, how they frame their claims and how they plan their protest. For example, the proximity to Hong Kong made it easy for Hong Kong journalists to visit Wukan and tell the protester’s story. In turn, this might have led Wukan villagers to focus on allies in their own geographical area. Regional variation in cases of rural unrest, such as where the protest is situated in relation to potential allies, is not sufficiently accounted for in the theory of rightful resistance.

The role of the social media is particularly interesting in this regard, because it constitutes a new type of ally and tool, a new factor in cases of rural unrest. Though social media was not solely responsible for bringing about the Wukan Incident, it is nevertheless regarded as a tool to reach out to a wider audience. This perception of social media and news media as a tool could help explain why Wukan villagers did not seek the help of political figures or other influential people. Wukan residents were unable to reach Beijing, but they were able to reach the Internet community instead.

Instead of using the two concepts of unpacking the state and reliance on allies to explain rural resistance behavior in China, I offer a sort of analogy. Rural protesters seeking redress for injustices are similar to fishermen casting their baited hooks into the sea. These protesters are fishing for attention, and rely on media and other allies to make a big splash and upset the calm surface of the water. A big splash increases the likelihood of government officials taking the bait. Government officials want to avoid a big splash, because it sends a

²⁴⁸ O'Brien and Li (2007, p.13)

ripple effect throughout society and may cause social instability. Taking this analogy a step further, I make the argument that the protester is not trying to hook the biggest fish, the central government in Beijing, because he knows this is a very unlikely catch. The protester has no way of knowing who will take the bait, if anyone. In the case of Wukan, the protester simply chose the most local spot to start fishing and never even thought about catching the biggest fish. The protesters are even with equipped with a new fishing net; social media.

6.5 Conclusion

My findings show that Wukan villagers were very convinced they had a reasonable case and were treating it in a legal, rightful manner. Based on interviews with Wukan residents, I have found clear evidence of rightful claims; Wukan protesters operated in a near-legal manner and used boundary-spanning claims that did not challenge the central government. Furthermore, my findings suggest the Wukan protesters clearly distinguished between local and central government, both in terms of framing their claims and in terms of talking about how to solve the land dispute. This can be regarded as an example of unpacking the state. The interviews also revealed a heavy reliance on the media as ally, but there is little evidence of Wukan protesters seeking out other allies. In terms of these concepts, the Wukan Incident could be considered a type of rightful resistance. This shows that the theory of rightful resistance is still a valid theoretical framework.

However, the idea of unpacking the state is too broadly conceptualized, and is an oversimplified concept for China. The relationship between peasant and the state is far more complicated than a simple local-central divide. Regional variations may be crucial to our understanding of how villagers in different provinces perceive their opportunities to protest and reach out to allies. If unpacking the state provides an opportunity for protesters to make their case, I argue that the protester will have different perceptions of this opportunity depending on geographical location and access to political decision-makers. I conclude that there is room for expanding the theory of rightful resistance to include variables such as geographical location.

7 Conclusion

Social unrest in rural China is an important topic for those who wish to understand more about the political and economic challenges facing the Chinese Communist Party today. The widespread abuse of collective land ownership rights since the reform era is a major cause of rural unrest in China, and mass incidents will likely continue to increase. The Wukan Incident is one of many cases of rural unrest that illustrate the growing gap between urban and rural development, the deep-seated problems of local government corruption and the obvious need for land rights reform.

The central government is all too aware that the continued exploitation of Chinese peasants is not only a barrier to rural development, but also a sure source of future conflict. At a key meeting held in November 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee laid out a blueprint for comprehensive reforms. Though the details of the reforms are unknown, President Xi later held a speech in which he pointed to growing democratic rights awareness and increasing complaints over social injustice and said that the reforms are meant to promote social equity and justice. Xi further stated; “if the problems of social injustice are not addressed immediately, it will not only affect the people’s confidence in reform and opening up, but also affect social harmony and stability.”²⁴⁹

Considering this grave concern for social stability and with the legitimacy of the CCP at stake, it is difficult to understand why the central government does not intervene and handle protracted and destabilizing mass incidents, such as the Wukan Incident, sooner rather than later. The Wukan Incident was a mass incident with a very high number of participants and a very high degree of international media attention. Even though Wukan protesters did not challenge the political system or demand political reform, mass incidents are generally seen as a major threat to social stability. The theory of rightful resistance shows that by using rightful claims and strategically aligning with the central government, rural protesters are able to limit their conflict to local government inadequacies and remain relatively non-threatening in the eyes of the regime.

The theory of rightful resistance is therefore a good framework for understanding rural protests under China’s authoritarian rule. Doing a case study on such a politically sensitive subject as rural resistance in China has complicated the collection of data in many ways. A

²⁴⁹ Xi (Dec 31, 2013) “(...) 这个问题不抓紧解决, 不仅会影响人民群众对改革开放的信心, 而且会影响社会和谐稳定.”

major limitation of this thesis is the limited number of interviews conducted in Wukan village. Therefore I have relied on other methods such as observation, conducting interviews with Chinese academics as well as studies of texts, microblogs and video documentaries to support my findings from the interviews.

There is nothing particularly new in terms of the scale, cause or outcome of the Wukan Incident, and in many ways the theory of rightful resistance is still valid. I have used the theory of rightful resistance as a tool to analyze findings from fieldwork in Wukan village, and argued that the Wukan Incident could be considered a case of rightful resistance. I have used three major concepts from rightful resistance to show how Wukan protester behavior could be described as rightful resistance; they made rightful claims, tried to unpack the state, and relied heavily on the media as an ally.

However, this thesis has also discovered some new variables that lead me to conclude that Wukan is a revised case of rightful resistance. My findings indicate that social media was a new, important tool for the Wukan protesters. The use of the Internet is a new and more direct way of mobilizing support from the public, and a development since O'Brien and Li published their book *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. Respondents in Wukan said that the land dispute was such a big problem for the village community that the protests would have happened regardless of whether or not Patriot No.1 had posted in online chat groups. However, there is still plenty of evidence in the Wukan case of social media being used as a strategic tool to reach a wider audience and put more pressure on the government to respond. First of all, bloggers such as Zhang Jianxing actively sought to spread the word about the Wukan Incident and used a variety of social media sites to do this. Secondly, my interview respondents claimed that social media sites allowed more people to participate and made it easier to document events. The increasing use of the Internet as a tool to mobilize a wider audience is arguably a new variable in cases of rural unrest in China.

In my conversations with Wukan villagers, there was a clear tendency to emphasize the role of social media in the Wukan Incident among those with experience living in the city. China's leadership has focused on urbanization as a primary driver of future economic growth. Moving the urban frontier closer to the countryside will affect citizens' access to information and subsequently their political consciousness. Considering the fast pace of urbanization in southern China, the use of social media and the Internet in rural protests would be an interesting topic for further study. Yang Guobin has already researched the growing importance of the Internet as a new way of organizing, protesting and swaying public

opinion.²⁵⁰ Rachel Murphy has also done research into the increasing importance of the Internet, blogs and other web activity in Chinese civil society and public discourse.²⁵¹

However, these research projects focus on urban Chinese citizens. An interesting ethnographic research study done by Elisa Oreglia explores the impact and use of the Internet in the Chinese countryside. Oreglia's research is based on fieldwork in three villages in Shandong and Hebei province between 2010 and 2011, and she argues that the Internet is "incorporated into rural residents' lives in ways that are different from their urban counterparts".²⁵² How does this new online activity translate to collective online *activism* in the countryside? In a recent study, Jian-Chuan Zhang and Ying Qin echo my argument that it is the huge disparities between urban and rural areas that warrant studies of Internet use and civic engagement in rural China. Zhang and Qin rely on survey data provided by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), an Internet research organization in China, and analyze whether or not Internet use among rural people has an impact on their engagement in public affairs.²⁵³

Researching the growing importance of online activism in rural China could also be considered in the framework of rightful resistance theory. O'Brien and Li show how mobile phones were used as a means to communicate and coordinate collective action in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the use of social media as a communication tool could be seen as a natural extension of this line of thought.

In addition to highlighting the growing importance of social media, I have also claimed that rightful resistance theory does not delve deep enough into regional variations in mass incidents in China. Wukan villagers deliberately differentiated between local and central government in order to put forth their claims, and this corresponds to the idea of unpacking the state. However, Wukan residents had a very vague and abstract way of talking about higher levels of government, and a propensity to rely on allies in the media instead of reaching out to political figures. I have argued that the geographical location of Wukan had a significant influence on how protesters viewed opportunities for protesting and subsequently how they made use of allies. The limited effectiveness of the petitioning system (one of the only legal mechanisms available to Chinese protesters) combined with the geographical distance from the central government could have led them to reach out to foreign media and

²⁵⁰ Yang (2009)

²⁵¹ Murphy (2011)

²⁵² Oreglia (2012)

²⁵³ Zhang and Qin (2012)

the Internet community instead of trying to gain allies in the political system. These findings suggest rural resistance in China is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by one theory alone. My case study of the Wukan Incident has shown that the geographical location of the protest and the growing use of social media may be new key variables to understanding cases of rural unrest in China.

Bibliography

- Ai, Xiaoming. 艾晓明. 2012a. "Three Days in Wukan: Day 1 (乌坎三日: 第一天 Wukan san ri: Di yi tian)." Accessed 24.04.2014.
<https://http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5ITNfxJtLk> Running time: 27 min.
- Ai, Xiaoming. 艾晓明. 2012b. "Three Days in Wukan: Day 2 (乌坎三日: 第二天 Wukan san ri: Di er tian)." Accessed 24.04.2014.
<https://http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oOhe9Eus7M>, Running time: 36 mins.
- Bandurski, David. Dec 19, 2011. "Chinese-language coverage of Wukan." China Media Project. Accessed 15.02.2013. <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/12/19/17650>.
- Bernstein, Thomas P., and Xiaobo Lü. 2000. "Taxation without Representation: Peasants, the Central and the Local States in Reform China." *The China Quarterly* (163):742-763.
- Bernstein, Thomas P., and Xiaobo Lü. 2003. *Taxation without representation in rural China*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cai, Yongshun. 2010. *Collective resistance in China : why popular protests succeed or fail*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Chen, Xi. 2007. "Between Defiance and Obedience: Protest Opportunism in China." In *Grassroots political reform in contemporary China*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Chen, Xi. 2009. "Review: Rightful Resistance in Rural China by Kevin J. O'Brien; Lianjiang Li." *The China Journal* (61):176-178.
- Chen, Xilin. 陈西林. 2012. "Wukan (烏坎)." iSun TV (陽光衛視 Yangguang weishi). Accessed 26.03.2014. <http://beijingcream.com/2012/09/watch-wukan-documentary-by-isun-tv/>, Running time: 1 hr, 22 mins, 9 secs.
- China Academy of Social Sciences, 中国社会科学院. 2014. "Research Report on the Features, Causes and Response of Mass Incidents (群体性事件的特点, 诱因及其应对 Quntixing shijian de tedian, youyin jiqi yingdui)." In *Blue Book of Rule of Law: Annual Report on China's Rule of Law (法治蓝皮书: 中国法治发展报告 Fazhi lanpi shu Zhongguo fazhi fazhan baogao)*, edited by Tian He (田禾) and Li Lin (李林).
- Diamant, Neil Jeffrey, Stanley B. Lubman, and Kevin J. O'Brien. 2005. *Engaging the law in China : state, society, and possibilities for justice*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

- Doyon, Jérôme, Francois Godement, David Péneau, Emmmanuel Puig, and Hugo Winckler. 2012. "Control at the grassroots: China's new toolbox." Accessed 27.04.14. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Analysis_Control_at_the_Grassroots_June2012.pdf.
- Fang, Lan. Feb 26, 2013. "Urbanization of the People Must Follow That of the Land." Caixin Online. Accessed 03.04.2014. <http://english.caixin.com/2013-02-26/100495363.html>.
- Feng, Riyao. 冯日遥. Oct 21, 2013. "Ten thousand people in Shantou blocked from petitioning land survey group (汕头万人向土地调查组告状遭拦截 Shantou wan ren xiang tudi diaocha zu gaozhuang zao lanjie)." Radio Free Asia (自由亚洲电台 Ziyou Yazhou diantai). Accessed 08.05.2014. <http://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/land-10212013092319.html>.
- French, Howard W. December 9, 2005. "20 Reported Killed as Chinese Unrest Escalates." The New York Times. Accessed 15.02.2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/09/international/asia/09cnd-china.html?hp&ex=1134190800&en=a42a6c1e282d9ade&ei=5094&partner=homepage>.
- Fung, Brian. Sept 23, 2012. "Wukan Revisited: No, China's Village Experiment in Democracy Isn't Over." The Atlantic. Accessed 23.04.2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/wukan-revisited-no-chinas-village-experiment-in-democracy-isnt-over/262734/>.
- Gerring, John. 2007. *Case study research : principles and practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goertz, Gary. 2006. *Social science concepts : a user's guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goldman, Merle. 2007. "The Assertion of Rights in Rural China." *The Review of Politics* 69 (3):495-497.
- Guangdong News, 南方网 Nanfang wang. 9 December 2011. "Shanwei press release on the results of the handling of the 9.21 incident in Wukan, Lufeng (汕尾通报“9·21”陆丰乌坎村事件处置结果 Shanwei tongbao 9.21Lufeng Wukan cun shijian chuzhi jieguo)." Guangdong News. Accessed 19.04.2014. http://news.southcn.com/dishi/shanwei/content/2011-12/09/content_34742612_2.htm.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov., and Stig Thøgersen. 2008. *Kina - Individ og samfunn*: Universitetsforlaget.
- Ho, Peter. 2001. "Who Owns China's Land? Policies, Property Rights and Deliberate Institutional Ambiguity." *The China Quarterly* (166):394-421.

- Hui, Echo. Jan 16, 2013. "Grass roots leader withdraws from politics as Wukan loses faith in democracy experiment." South China Morning Post. Accessed 15.02.2014.
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1406766/grass-roots-leader-withdraws-politics-wukan-loses-faith-democracy>.
- Hui, Echo. Mar 03, 2014. "Wukan village's future under threat as ex-cadres retake party reins." South China Morning Post. Accessed 23.04.2014.
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1439293/wukan-villages-future-under-threat-ex-cadres-retake-party-reins>.
- Hui, Echo. Mar 14, 2014. "Wukan protest leader Yang Semaο arrested, accused of taking bribes." South China Morning Post. Accessed 06.04.2014.
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1448618/wukan-protest-leader-arrested-accused-taking-bribes>.
- Hui, Echo. Mar 26, 2014. "Chinese authorities just won't give up, says Wukan protest leader who fled to US." South China Morning Post. Accessed 06.04.2014.
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1457311/wukan-protest-leader-fled-us-fearing-safety>.
- Jacob, Rahul, and Jamil Anderlini. Jan 30, 2012. "Wukan Offers Democratic Model for China." Financial Times. Accessed 15.02.2014. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/989564ac-4b10-11e1-88a3-00144feabdc0.html> - axzz2rJFQPCLI.
- Jie, Jiang. Mar 20, 2014. "Second Wukan deputy chief detained for bribery." Global Times. Accessed 06.04.2014. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/849609.shtml> - .U0F8T9zruAA.
- Kennedy, John James. 2009. "Review: Rightful Resistance in Rural China by Kevin J. O'Brien; Lianjiang Li." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2):608-609.
- Kvale, Steinar. 1997. *Det Kvalitative Forskningsintervju*. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal.
- Lam, Willy. Jan 11, 2012. "Grim Future for Wukan Model." Asia Times Online Accessed 15.02.2014. <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/NA11Ad01.html>.
- Landesa Rural Development Institute. 2011. "Landesa 6th 17-Province China Survey." Landesa, China Renmin University and Michigan State University. Accessed 11.05.14. <http://www.landesa.org/china-survey-6/>.
- Lee, Lynn, and James Leong. 2012. "Episode 2: Democracy is complicated." Al Jazeera Accessed 12.01.2014.
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2013/06/2013626153044866869.html> Running time: 25 mins.
- Lee, Raymond M. 1993. *Doing research on sensitive topics*. London ; Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications.

- Levy, Richard. 2007. "Henan and Guangdong provinces." In *Grassroots political reform in contemporary China*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Li, Cheng. 2001. *China's leaders : the new generation*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Li, Lianjiang. 2008. "Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside." *Comparative Politics* 40 (2):209-226.
- Li, Yunfang. 李云芳. March 23, 2014. "Pingdu Brews Tragedy with Rapid Push for Urbanization (平度强力推进城镇化酿惨剧 Pingdu qiangli tuijin chengzhenhua niang canju)." *Oriental Morning Post* (东方早报 Dongfang Zaobao). Accessed 25.03.2014. http://epaper.dfdaily.com/dfzb/html/2014-03/23/content_874744.htm.
- Liang, Wei. 梁惟. 2012. "Looking at new trends in China's mass incidents through the Wukan Incident (透过乌坎事件看我国群体性事件的新趋向 Tougou Wukan Shijian kan woguo quntixing shijian de xin quxiang)." *Party cadre school journal* (党政干部学刊 Dangzheng ganbu xuekan) (4):92-95.
- Liang, Wei. 梁惟, and Ying Ge. 李营歌 Li. 2012. "New trends and rational rethinking of China's mass incidents - Using the Wukan Incident as an example (我国群体性事件的新趋向及其理性反思—以乌坎事件为例 Woguo quntixing shijian de xin quxiang jiqi lixing fansi - yi Wukan shijian weili)." *Journal of Chongqing Institute of Socialism* (重庆社会主义学院学报 Chongqing shehui zhuyi xueyuan xuebao) (3):71-64.
- Lubman, Stanley. Jan 07, 2012. "The Wukan Protests and the Rule of Law." *Wall Street Journal, China Real Time Report*. Accessed 25.04.2014. <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/01/07/the-wukan-protests-and-the-rule-of-law/?mod=WSJBlog&mod=chinablog>.
- Murphy, Rachel. 2011. "Civil Society and Media in China." In *Charting China's Future: Domestic and International Challenges*, edited by David Shambaugh, pp. 57-66. Routledge.
- O'Brien, Kevin J. 2006a. "Discovery, Research (Re)design, and Theory Building." In *Doing fieldwork in China*, edited by Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- O'Brien, Kevin J. 2006b. "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China." In *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, edited by Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- O'Brien, Kevin J., and Lianjiang Li. 2007. *Rightful resistance in rural China*. Repr. ed, *Cambridge studies in contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Oreglia, Elisa. 2012. "The Sent-Down Internet: Going Online in Rural China." paper presented at the 10th Chinese Internet Research Conference, May 21-22, 2012. Conference hosted by University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication & Journalism, Los Angeles. Accessed 23.05.14.
http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/files/eoreglia_the_sent-down_internet.pdf.
- Pei, Minxin. 2010. "Rights and resistance - The changing contexts of the dissident movement" In *Chinese Society - Change, conflict and resistance*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, 31-56. London; New York: Routledge.
- Peng Zhao et al, 赵鹏, 等. 2008. "The Warning Signs of "Typical Mass Incidents" ("典型群体性事件"的警号 Dianxing quntixing shijian de jinghao)." *Outlook (瞭望 Liaowang)* 36.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2002. *Challenging the mandate of Heaven : social protest and state power in China, Asia and the Pacific*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Perry, Elizabeth J., and Mark Selden. 2010. *Chinese society : change, conflict and resistance*. 3rd ed. London; New York: Routledge.
- Polsky, Ned. 2006. *Hustlers, beats, and others*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.
- Qiang, Xiao. 2011. "The rise of online public opinion and its political impact." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan Shirk. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ran, Tao. Dec 16, 2011. "China's land grab is undermining grassroots democracy." *The Guardian*. Accessed 22.04.2014.
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/16/china-land-grab-undermining-democracy>.
- Rui, Di. 瑞迪. Mar 23, 2012. "Wukan Youth Zhang Jianxing: Formulating the Wukan Model Using the Spring of Democracy (乌坎青年张建兴：以民主之春拟定乌坎模式 Wukan qingnian Zhang Jianxing: yi minzhu zhi chun niding Wukan moshi)." *Radio France Internationale* Accessed: 27.04.2014. <http://www.chinese.rfi.fr/中国/20120323-乌坎青年张建兴：以民主之春拟定乌坎模式>
- Saich, Tony. 2011. *Governance and politics of China*. 3rd ed, *Comparative government and politics*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shirk, Susan. 2011. "Changing Media, Changing China." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan Shirk. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Silverman, David. 2010. *Doing qualitative research : a practical handbook*. 3rd ed. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE.

- Silverman, David, and Paul Atkinson. 1997. "Kundera's Immortality: The interview society and the invention of the self." *Qualitative Inquiry* 3.
- State Bureau for Letters and Visits, (国家信访局 Guojia xinfang ju). 1995, revised 2005. "The State Council's Letters and Visits Regulation (国务院信访条例 Guowuyuan xinfang tiaoli)." Accessed 28.04.2014. http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/xffg/2009-11/24/c_1395091.htm.
- Sæther, Elin. 2006. "Fieldwork as Coping and Learning." In *Doing Fieldwork in China*, edited by Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, (中华人民共和国宪法 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xianfa). 1982. The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, (全国人民代表大会 Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui). Accessed 28.04.2014. http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/node_505.htm.
- The Economist. Oct 20, 2012. "A revolution fizzles." The Economist. Accessed 01.05.14. <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21564871-year-after-their-uprising-wukan's-leaders-see-drawbacks-democracy>.
- The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, (中华人民共和国村民委员会组织法 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa). 1998, revised 2010. The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. Accessed 31.03.2014. http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2010-10/28/content_1732986.htm.
- The World Bank and China's State Council Development Research Center. March 25, 2014. "Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Urbanization - Supporting Report 3: China's Urbanization and Land - A Framework for Reform." Accessed 10.05.2014. <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/EAP/China/Urban-China-SRs1-3.pdf>.
- Thøgersen, Stig. 2006. "Approaching the Field through Written Sources." In *Doing Fieldwork in China*, edited by Stig Thøgersen and Maria Heimer. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tong, Jingrong. 2011. *Investigative journalism in China : journalism, power, and society*. London ; New York: Continuum.
- Trevaskes, Susan. 2012. "The Ideology of Law and Order, China Yearbook 2012." The China Story. Accessed 03.05.14. <http://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2012/chapter-3-the-ideology-of-law-and-order/>.
- Trevaskes, Susan, and Elisa Nesossi. 2012. *Introduction to "当前压力维稳的困境与出路—再论中国社会的刚性稳定 (Reassessing Chinese Society's 'Rigid Stability' - Stability Preservation Through Pressure, Its Predicament and the Way Out)"*. Edited by

Jianrong Yu. 探索与争鸣 (Exploration and Free Views), 上海社会科学界联合会 Shanghai Federation of Social Sciences.

- Tsai, Lily L. 2010. "Quantitative Research and Issues of Political Sensitivity in Rural China." In *Contemporary Chinese politics : new sources, methods, and field strategies*, edited by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion, p.246-266. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Turton, Andrew. 1986. "Patrolling the Middle-Ground: Methodological Perspectives on "Everyday Peasant Resistance"." In *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South East Asia*, edited by James C. Scott and Benedict J. Kerkvliet, 36-49. Frank Cass and Co. Ltd. .
- Wang, Sally. Jan 4, 2012. "20 Years of Anger Unleashed." South China Morning Post. Accessed 15.02.2014. <http://www.scmp.com/article/989180/20-years-anger-unleashed>.
- Wang, Zhanjun. 王战军. 2006. "The Definition of Group Event and its Multidimensional Analysis (群体性事件的界定及其多维分析 Quntixing shijian de jieding jiqi duowei fenxi)." *Journal of Political Science and Law (政法学刊 Zhengfa Xuekan)* 23 (5).
- Womack, Brantly. 1991. "In search of democracy: public authority and popular power in China." In *Contemporary Chinese Politics in Historical Perspective*, edited by Brantly Womack. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, R. Bin. 2007. "Review: Rightful Resistance in Rural China by Kevin J. O'Brien; Lianjiang Li." *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (4):850-851.
- Xi, Jinping. 习近平. Dec 31, 2013. "Unifying the Thought and Spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee (切实把思想统一到党的十八届三中全会精神上来 Qieshi ba sixiang tongyi dao dang de shi ba jie san zhong quanhui jingshen shanglai)." Xinhua News. Accessed 02.05.14. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-12/31/c_118787463.htm.
- Xinmin Weekly. Mar 26, 2012. "Lin Zuluang: Return of the true Wukan (林祖銓：还原一个真实乌坎 Lin Zuluang: Huanyuan yi ge zhenshi Wukan)." Xinmin Weekly (新民周刊 Xinmin Zhoukan). Accessed 20.10.2013. http://xmzk.xinmin.cn/html/2012-03/26/content_35_1.htm.
- Yang, Guobin. 2006. "The Internet and Civil Society in China - Coevolutionary Dynamics and Digital Formations." In *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, edited by Guoli Liu Lowell Dittmer, p.303-318. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Yang, Guobin. 2009. *The power of the Internet in China : citizen activism online, Contemporary Asia in the world*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Yu, Jianrong. 于建嵘. 2009. "Major Types and Basic Characteristics of Group Event in Today's China (当前我国群体性事件的主要类型及其基本特征 Dangqian woguo quntixing shijian de zhuyao leixing jiqi jiben tezheng)." (*中国政法大学学报 Zhongguo Zhengfa Daxue Xuebao*) 6 (14).
- Yu, Jianrong. 于建嵘. 2012. "Reassessing Chinese Society's 'Rigid Stability' - Stability Preservation Through Pressure, Its Predicament and the Way Out (当前压力维稳的困境与出路—再论中国社会的刚性稳定 Dangqian yali weiwen de kunjingyu chulu - zai lun zhongguo shehui de gangxing wending)." In: *Exploration and Free Views (探索与争鸣)*, Shanghai Federation of Social Sciences (上海社会科学界联合会).
- Yu, Jianrong. 于建嵘. Jan 19, 2011. "The Unbearable Cost." Caixin Online. Accessed 27.04.14. <http://english.caixin.com/2011-01-19/100218601.html>.
- Zeng, Fanbin. 曾凡斌. 2011. "Discussion on Media Report on Group Events (群体性事件中的媒体报道的存在问题, 成因与对策 Quntixingshijian zhong de meiti baodao de cunzai wenti, chengyin yu duice)." *Science, Economy, Society* 29 (3).
- Zeng, Zhimin. 2013. "Wukan: The Whole Story." *The China Nonprofit Review* 5:17-101.
- Zhang, Jian-Chuan, and Ying Qin. 2012. "Impact of Internet Use on Civic Engagement in Chinese Rural Areas: A Preliminary Research." In *Active Citizen Participation in E-Government: A Global Perspective*, edited by Aroon Manoharan and Marc Holzer, pps. 296-313. IGI Global.
- Zhang, Yonghong. 张永宏, and Li Jingjun. 李静君. 2012. "Creating consent: how grassroots government can absorb resistance from the masses (制造同意: 基层政府怎样吸纳民众的抗争 Zhizao tongyi: Jiceng zhengfu zenyang xina minzhong de kangzheng)." *Open Times (开放时代 Kaifang shidai)* (7).
- Zhao, Yang. 赵扬. 2013. "Moving towards cooperative governance- Where is Wukan headed? (走向合作治理—乌坎往何处去 Zouxiang hexuo zhili wang hechu qu)." *Building Society (社会建设 Shehui jianshe)* (5):53-56.

Appendix A: Interview guide

Can you tell me what happened in Wukan?

请你给我介绍一下这个乌坎事件，这个事件怎么发生的？

Was the protest successful?

你觉得你们 9 月 21 日的示威成功了吗？

Why, why not?

为什么？

What was the outcome?

结果怎么样？

What do you think was the most important result of the September 21 incident?

对你来说，9 月 21 日的事件以后，最重要的结果是什么？

Do you think it is a turn for the better?

你觉得是转机吗？

What do you think about the future?

你对乌坎的将来有什么看法？

Do you have any hopes for your family's future?

你对你家庭的将来有什么希望？

Do you have any plans for the future?

你将来有什么计划？

Could you tell me something about what you were doing during the demonstrations in Wukan? Were you there, did you participate in any kind of demonstration? If you did, why?

你也参加了吗？你参加示威吗？你上访了，写信访，等等？为什么？

你们为什么决定示威了？

Did you lose land? How much land did you lose?

Did you talk to your neighbors about the situation in the village? How often? Did it happen more frequently than before?

那时候，你是跟你的隔壁，跟你的朋友们讨论乌坎事件了吗？每天都讨论了吗？

Did you seek new information, or did you just wait and see? Did you give information to others, did you spread news? Can you give an example?

这个问题关于你们乌坎人怎么传播信息。你对事件的过程信息有什么态度？一般来说，你自己找不找新闻？你等别人的信息吗？你传播了信息吗？你给别人信息？请给例子。

Did you use social media to get information or spread information?

你自己适用 weibo, qq, 别的社会媒体传播新闻吗？请给例子。

Did your relationship with people change? In what way? With whom?
你和别人的关系变化了吗？怎么样的改变？你跟谁的关系改变了？

How do you think the foreign media got wind of this incident?
在你看来，国外媒体，香港媒体，他们怎么闻风了这个事件？

What do you think about journalists who come here to ask questions? Is this good or bad?
Good for you? Bad for you? Bad for government? Have you been interviewed before?
这个问题关于你对记者的看法。你对记者来这里为了访问你们有什么看法？你觉得他们来了有什么好处，有什么坏处？你觉得他们对你们有好处，还是对政府有好处？有没有记者采访了你？

Do you think outside media has attached too much significance to this incident?
你觉得乌坎被外界附加了太多的政治色彩吗？

Did you vote in the previous local election?
去年你参加了乌坎的选举吗？

Did you think it was interesting? Why?
你对那个选举有什么看法？

Did you feel like you had enough information, and enough knowledge about the situation to make a decision/to cast your vote?
你觉得不觉得你投票的时候，你对选举，乌坎的情况，的了解很深？

Do you feel like your vote made a difference?
你觉得你投的票有作用吗？

How do you feel about the new village committee?
你对乌坎的村委会有什么影响？

Do you trust the new Village Committee?
你对他们有相信吗？

Do you know people on the committee?
你认识不认识乌坎的村委委员？

What do you think about Lin Zuluan?
你对林祖銓有什么看法？他众望所归吗？

How did the protests start? Did people send text messages or call? Did people distribute leaflets and paper?
9月21日的示威怎么开始的？你收到了短信吗？他们打电话给你们？是松散组织了？你觉得他们准备了好不好？你们写了标语吗？

Has this incident changed the way you feel about the central government?

这个问题关于你对中央政府有什么影响。 你觉得乌坎事件变化了你对政府的态度吗？

What, in your mind, is the core of the incident?

在你看来，乌坎事件的核心是什么？

Have other people from other provinces come to ask for help/advice?

广东外听说过你们的事件来看你们吗？ 你知道吗？

Do you think the topic of this case can represent all of China's rural land problems?

这个案例的议题能代表全中国的农民土地问题吗？

Have you heard of the "Wukan model"? What do you think of the "Wukan model"?

你听说过乌坎模式这个词吗？ 你对乌坎模式有什么看法？

What was the role of the Wukan youth during the Wukan Incident?

乌坎事件的时候，乌坎年青人的角色是什么？

Were you afraid at the time of the Wukan Incident?

乌坎事件的时候，你害怕什么？

Appendix B: An overview of primary and secondary sources

I Primary sources: Interviews conducted in Wukan

Interview #	Date	Gender	Age	Marital status	Notes	Present at showing of documentary ²⁵⁴
1	04.11.13, 05.11.13, 06.11.13	Male	28	Single	My first contact in Wukan, also referred to as 'gatekeeper' Wei. Works in another city. Conducted interviews over the course of several days.	No
2	04.11.13, 05.11.13	Male	29	Married	Married to village council representative.	Yes
3	05.11.13	Male	19	Single	Works in another city. Was not in Wukan during the incident, but participated on social media.	Yes
4	04.11.13, 05.11.13, 06.11.13, 07.11.13	Female	32	Married	Host family, wife, mother of three children.	Yes
5	06.11.13	Male	30s	Married	Host family, husband. No interview , but he was present during the screening of the documentary.	Yes
6	06.11.13	Male	50s	Married	Interview at local shop.	No
7	06.11.13	Female	60	Married	Interview at local shop.	No
8	07.11.13	Male	86	Married	Head of host family household. Almost deaf, and spoke only local dialect. Written interview.	No
9	06.11.13	Male	32	Unknown	Told me he was a contact person for many journalists.	Yes
10	06.11.13	Male	30s	Unknown	No interview , but he was present at documentary.	Yes
11	07.11.13	Female	60	Married	Conversation while watching another documentary	No

²⁵⁴ Documentary entitled *Three days in Wukan* by Ai Xiaoming was screened on the evening of 06.11.13

Unless otherwise noted, all interview subjects participated in the Wukan protests.

II Secondary sources: Academic interviews

Interview #	Date	Gender	Location	Notes
12	01.11.13	Male	Guangzhou	PhD student, has been to Wukan several times in order to conduct research.
13	11.10.13, 29.10.13	Male	Guangzhou	Professor of Law, specializes in the field of human rights law.
14	18.11.13	Male	Hong Kong	Professor of Political Science, specializes in the field of social conflict and collective resistance in China.

III Primary sources from social media

1) Zhang, Jianxing (@WK 张建兴) Posted on Weibo: 19.12.2011, 10:05

Weibo message: 致媒体朋友们 (embedded image text: “乌坎村很高兴可以见到这么多的媒体人员，对于我村事件，还请正面报道，避开“起义”，“起事”等字眼，我们不是起义，我们拥护共产党，我们爱国家。谢谢各位的关注！”)

Weibo message translation: To media friends (“Wukan village is pleased to see so many media staff, at our village incident, please report positively, avoid words such as ‘revolt’, ‘rise in revolt’, we are not in revolt, we support the Communist party, we love our country. Thank you for your attention!”)

Accessed: 22.05.2014

URL: <http://www.weibo.com/1593236014/xCHZYFtme?mod=weibotime>

致媒体朋友

收起 | 查看大图 | 向左转 | 向右转



2011-12-19 10:05 来自iPhone客户端 | 举报

转发(2562) | 收藏 | 评论(613)

2) Zhang, Jianxing (@WK 张建兴) Posted on Weibo: 01.01.2012, 22:28

Weibo message: “各位博友，我的微博名 MR 张建兴要改为 WK 张建兴，庄烈宏也已经开微博，博名@WK 庄烈宏，希望大家多多支持我们！”

Weibo message translation: “All blog readers, my Weibo username MR ZhangJianxing will change to WK ZhangJianxing, Zhuang Liehong has already started using Weibo, username @WKZhuangLiehong, hope everyone will give us a lot of support!”

Accessed: 22.05.2014

URL: <http://www.weibo.com/1593236014/xELqiYdDf?mod=weibotime>

各位博友，我的微博名MR张建兴要改为WK张建兴，庄烈宏也已经开微博，博名@WK庄烈宏，希望大家多多支持我们！

2012-1-1 22:28 来自微博 weibo.com | 举报

👍 | 转发(143) | 收藏 | 评论(46)

3) Zhang, Jianxing (@WK 张建兴) Posted on Weibo: 02.09.2012, 15:42

Weibo message: “在 Youtube 看了阳光国际出品的全景式记录片《乌坎》，虽是短短 4 分钟的预告片，还是打败了我坚硬的心。眼泪，谁人能知？还能有什么，比这更痛彻心扉？ <http://t.cn/zWBxJUg>”

Weibo message translation: “I saw the iSun-produced feature documentary “Wukan” on Youtube, although it is only a 4 minutes long preview, it still defeated my hard heart. Tears, who would have known? Is there anything more painful to think of than this?”

Accessed: 22.05.2014

URL: <https://freeweibo.com/weibo/3485837032959281>

(This post has been deleted from Sina Weibo)



WK张建兴：在Youtube看了阳光国际出品的全景式记录片《乌坎》，虽是短短4分钟的预告片，还是打败了我坚硬的心。眼泪，谁人能知？还能有什么，比这更痛彻心扉？ <http://t.cn/zWBxJUg>



2012年09月02日 15:42

微博转发 (1) | 推特转发

4) Zhang, Jianxing (@WK 张建兴) Posted on Weibo: 26.03.2012, 19:19

Weibo message: “特别激动，qq 空间终于解封！12 月 11 日，正感谢腾讯没封我空间，发现封死了；用邮箱继续发，邮箱没了；用 qq 窗口直接发，qq 没了；微博还可用，一用全没了。共有 4 个 q 遭受不同程度的封锁。终于，解封了，结果发现，当时被转 800 多次的最后一篇日志，剩个 200 多...不知别人被删了多少。”

Message translation: “Very excited, qq blog has finally been reopened! On December 11th, I just wanted to thank Tencent for not blocking my blogspace, when I noticed the blogspace was closed; I continued sending via email, [then found out that] mail box had disappeared; I sent directly from the qq window, [then found] qq got blocked; I could still use the microblog, [but] everything got deleted after one time. All 4 q accounts have been blocked in various ways. Finally, they have unblocked it, but I discovered that the last entry that had been forwarded more than 800 times, has only been forwarded to some 200... Do not know how many others have had their posts deleted.”

Accessed: 22.05.2014

URL: <http://t.163.com/0063325282>

WK张建兴

[进入详情页](#)

特别激动，qq空间终于解封！12月11日，正感谢腾讯没封我空间，发现封死了；用邮箱继续发，邮箱没了；用qq窗口直接发，qq没了；微博还可用，一用全没了。共有4个q遭受不同程度的封锁。终于，解封了，结果发现，当时被转800多次的最后一篇日志，剩个200多...不知别人被删了多少。

Appendix C: Dictionary

Key words	Characters	Pinyin	Notes
"Patriot No. 1"	"爱国者 1 号"	aiguo zhe yi hao	
administrative village	行政村	xingzheng cun	
Arabic journalists	阿拉伯文记者	Alabowen jizhe	
central government	中央政府	zhongyang zhengfu	
corrupt/avaricious official	贪官	tanguan	
corruption	腐败	fubai	
defend rights	维权	weiquan	
fake	假	jia	
foreign journalists	外国记者	waiguo jizhe	
Free Weibo	自由微博	ziyou weibo	
friend	朋友	pengyou	
good (as in "a good movie")	好看	haokan	Literally "good to watch"
Hong Kong journalists	香港记者	Xianggang jizhe	
illegal	非法的	feifa de	
individuals with ulterior motives	别有用心的人	bie you yongxin de ren	
Internet café	网吧	wangba	
labor dispute	劳资纠纷	laozi jiufen	
land dispute issue	土地纠纷问题	tudi jiufen wenti	
land grab	抢地	qiangdi	
land problem	土地问题	tudi wenti	
mass incident	群体性事件	quntixing shijian	
mu (area measurement)	亩	mu	1 mu (亩 <i>mu</i>) = 614,4 m ²
natural village	自然村	zirancun	
netizen (internet citizen)	网民	wangmin	Literally "net-people"
official	官	guan	
overthrow corrupt officials	打倒贪官	dadao tanguan	
peasant	农民	nongmin	
petition	信访	xinfang	
positive reports	正面报道	zhengmian baodao	

relocation and land requisition	拆迁征地	chaiqian zhengdi	
revolt	起义	qiyi	verb, noun.
rightful, legal	合法	hefa	
rise in revolt	起事	qishi	
seek an audience with higher-ups	上访	shangfang	
sensitive	敏感	mingan	
share profit	分红	fenhong	
Sina Weibo	新浪微博	Xinlang weibo	
State Bureau for Letters and Visits	国家信访局	guojia xinfang ju	
temporary board of village representatives	村民代表临时理事会	cunmin daibiao linshi lishihui	
town	镇	zhen	
township	乡	xiang	
truthful	真实	zhenshi	
village committee	村民委员会 / 村委会	cunmin weiyuanhui / cunweihui	
village government	村政府	cun zhengfu	
village group	村民小组	cunmin xiaozu	
Wukan Harbor Industrial Development Company Ltd.	乌坎港事业开发公司	Wukan Gang Shiye Kaifa Gongsi	
Wukan Hot-blooded Youth Group	乌坎热血青年团	Wukan rexue qingnian tui	
Wukan Incident	乌坎事件	Wukan shijian	
Wukan model	乌坎模式	Wukan moshi	
yuan, unit of currency	元	yuan	

Place names	Chinese characters	Pinyin
Donghai town	东海	Donghai
Dongzhou	东洲	Dongzhou
Dujiatuan village	杜家疃村	Dujiatuan cun
Guangdong province	广东省	Guangdong sheng
Harbin city	哈尔滨市	Haerbin shi
Hebei province	河北省	Hebei sheng
Lintong village	莲塘村	Lintong cun
Lufeng city	陆丰市	Lufeng shi
Shandong province	山东省	Shandong sheng
Shanwei city	汕尾市	Shanwei shi
Wukan village	乌坎村	Wukan cun

Abbreviations	
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP/CPC	Chinese Communist Party/Communist Party of China
CCTV	Closed-circuit television
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
Land Law	Contracting of Rural Land Law (2003)
Organic Law	Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (1998)